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State of Power 2026

FASCISM

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AUTHORS: Esme Abbott, Théo Bourgeron, Irene Crestanello, Roberto J. González, Shifa Herko, Aminah Jasho, Rohith Jyothish ,Natalia Marsicovetere, Laura Roth, Irene Franco Rubio, Clément Segal, Shayan Shaukat, Alyna Smith, Julisa Tambunan, Miguel Urbán Crespo, Matt Varco, Ylkye, Chenchen Zhang

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EDITOR: Nick Buxton

COPYEDITOR: Deborah Eade

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ILLUSTRATOR: Sana Nasir

INFOGRAPHIC RESEARCH: Connor Mulhern

DESIGN: Evan Clayburg

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LIFEBOATS, STEAMPUNK AND COLONIALISM: FASCISM TODAY

A conversation with Alberto Toscano and Harsha Walia

In this fascinating opening interview for State of Power 2026, scholar activists Toscano and Walia explore the historic roots and current capitalist dynamics that have led to the rise of fascism worldwide, and why the war on migrants, drugs and people in poverty have become linchpins for fascist mobilisation.

Nick: What is fascism and how does it differ today from its manifestations in the past?

Alberto: This is a somewhat awkward question for me because I have spent some time criticising the political science obsession with a hard-and-fast definition of fascism or with checklists telling us whether something is fascism or not. It's as if there were a diagnostic manual for political disorders where you could just tick off various features or elements. That said, we can start to approach the phenomenon of fascism by talking about it as a politics of domination, supremacy and exclusion that emerges from the crises of mass electoral democracies.

That's a very broad-brush take that hopefully allows us to think through the continuities as well as the differences between interwar European fascisms and current movements or regimes that we may want to characterise as fascist or fascistic.

My inclination is not to chase after an essence of fascism but to think of fascist potentials or fascist processes, to use a term that Angela Davis[1] was already using in the late 1960s and 1970s.

If we want to paint a picture of what fascism might mean in the present, we also must contend with the vast transformations in social and economic and political life that we've witnessed in the century since Mussolini's March on Rome. We also must confront issues that were not germane to interwar fascisms but are now absolutely key, namely climate catastrophe.

Harsha: A core of fascism is explicitly supremacist ideology that underlies its racism, sexism, patriarchy, and transphobia. All of those are inherent in neoliberalism and in electoral democracies. But fascism is explicitly supremacist in its orientation in ways that are distinct.

Scholars in the Black radical tradition would tell us fascism is colonialism. That is important, because so many explications of fascism revolve around Eurocentric ideas and the interwar period. George Jackson in the United States (US), [2]George Padmore's articulation of colonial fascism[3] or Aimé Césaire's prescient writing[4] would all tell us that the best way to understand fascism is as a stage of colonialism. I think that is the most important way of understanding it, as a face of colonialism, whether that's the imperialist face of colonialism or the settler colony in countries like Canada and the US.

Fascism is always counter-revolutionary and pro-capitalist, despite its attempts to co-opt the working class. It's always aligned with capitalism despite its outward tendencies to suggest that it's not. So those for me are the three key pillars of fascism: explicitly expressing supremacist ideology, rooted in colonialism, and a counter-revolutionary force aligned with capitalism.

Maybe the differences today from earlier periods are that in the interwar Europe fascism understood itself as going back to a former era, based on a nostalgia for a certain supremacist puritan politics and era. Whereas today fascism has much more of a lifeboat survivalist tendency as we contend with the climate crisis. It's less nostalgic and more apocalyptic, embedded in lifeboat Darwinian ideas.

The other important reality in the current era is that fascism is increasingly spreading around the world. We're living in a real or perceived multipolar world, with growing imperial or sub-imperial powers in the Global South. Fascist tendencies are spreading beyond the former North–South divide, backed by capital and transnational capital.

Nick: What do you see as the underlying key reasons for this resurgence of fascist politics in this moment?

Alberto: Among the foremost reasons is the one that Harsha was just alluding to in terms of the lifeboat framing of contemporary far-right and fascist movements. Since the 2007/2008 global financial crisis, and arguably before that too, we have experienced a long period of capitalist stagnation: diminishing socio-economic expectations and the shrinking of the social wage and social safety net, while efforts at more egalitarian or universalist social betterment have been repeatedly crushed or curtailed – often by the forces that present themselves as liberal or indeed even social democratic or left wing.

There has been a spreading 'common sense' that things are not going to get any better, that the pie is shrinking. Even climate denialists are often implicitly climate realists, for instance, when they talk about their apocalyptic scenarios of mass migration. After all, why would those mass migrations happen? Oh yes, it's because of that very thing they're saying is not the case.

The neoliberal ravaging of social expectations has baked in a sense of precarity and a foreclosed future, which has played a massive role in making the victories of the far right possible. It has created an undercurrent of profound cynicism. Ultimately, my sense is that most people don't believe in the grand rhetorical visions of becoming 'great again' or in futures of affluence or abundance but rather are mobilised by promises that they might retain some material and symbolic goods for whatever ethnic, national, religious or class group to which they belong. If things are inexorably immiserating, so the thought seems to go, perhaps that can be slowed down through policies of exclusion or hierarchy. Often the only goods available are purely symbolic, like the impoverishing or humiliation of others, not your own betterment. Using W.E.B. Du Bois' term the 'psychological wages' may increase while the material ones flatline. This notion of a zero-sum game dovetails with the centrality of anti-migrant racist and xenophobic politics to the far right across the globe.

Harsha: I concur with everything Alberto just said. The rise of fascistic tendencies has shifted from that sense of a nostalgic past to contending with the misery of the present and also, importantly, an unknown misery into the future. There is no sense that things are getting better.

The vast majority of people worldwide understand the crisis of capitalism. The question is what they choose to do in response to that. Fascist tendencies more than anything offer people a sense of winning in a deeply unequal world. And that sense of winning is the psychological wage – it's the sadism, the culture wars, feeling superior to someone else.

Nick: What about the relationship of capital and particularly corporate elites with fascist leaders? Under neoliberalism, they were already winning, so why have they found common cause with fascist leaders?

Harsha: I'd say there's a few reasons. One is absolutely that neoliberalism works well for capitalism, but neoliberals also have to contend with the rising discontent of more sectors of society. The right-wing and fascist tendencies offer a false counter to neoliberalism that allows capitalism to resuscitate and save itself. Many neoliberals are well aware that fascism can offer a façade of being contra-capital to offer something to people disaffected by the crises of capitalism while actually maintaining capitalism. So that is one reason that neoliberals align with fascist leaders.

Many corporate leaders, as individuals with enormous political power, also actually believe in fascist ideas. Beyond the US, which is too obvious an example, we can look at India, where intergenerational wealth and neoliberalism are deeply marked by caste and racism. The billionaires, like Ambani and Adani, themselves believe in caste-based supremacy and anti-Muslim racism. Ambani, who is India's richest man and a big backer of Narendra Modi, runs a 'news' channel filled all day long with anti-Muslim drivel. So, there are those in the capitalist class – like Ambani in India or Musk in the US – who use their capital to back fascist leaders because they genuinely believe in these ideas, and not necessarily to save their capitalist interests – though of course fascist leaders will generally also protect their interests.

Alberto: This is an extremely thorny question, because the situation today is distinctly different from the one that saw the emergence of fascism in the interwar period. Back then, the bulk of industrial and finance capital eventually backed fascist leaders due to massive social turbulence, unemployment, and large-scale workers' and revolutionary movements that created a crisis of capital accumulation. But that elite choice for an extreme and potentially disruptive political option on the grounds of a political-economic emergency or crisis is not where we're at today. We are in a long period of stagnation, but also a time of enormous profits for a few large companies, especially in Big Tech. We are also 50 years into a period marked by the substantial emancipation of capital from the working class, from regulation and taxation. A big question today is: what else do the capitalists want?

One answer might be that we are not dealing with a faceless anonymous corporate capital, but rather a billionaire class that exercises personalised political power at a planetary scale. If you think of Bezos, Ellison or Musk, the individual whims and ideologies of these figures have historical consequence. At times it seems as if it's no longer a question of a statistical or macro look at the interests of the capitalist class overall, but something more like: what are the politics of these six or seven people?

So, when Musk speaks live at an Alternative for Deutschland (AFD) or English Defence League (EDL) rally, he is not speaking generally in interest of the capitalist class, but rather as a white supremacist with his own idiosyncratic history and obsession. We live in a world of such irrationality that personalised power of this kind enjoys an outsized role. Not only can a Musk intervene directly in the politics of Germany and England, he can also turn off satellites that assist Ukraine's defence against Russia's full-scale invasion of the country.

But if we zoom in at why Trump gets elected twice, it's not so much because of the billionaires *per se*, but largely due to a whole galaxy of much smaller capitalists, say owners of laundromats or gas stations or others that would previously have been classed among the petit bourgeoisie. This is a story that is compelling told in Melinda Cooper's recent book *Counterrevolution*.[5]

Nick: You started to touch on it here, but could you speak further on the class basis for far-right movements and what brings together this seemingly contradictory alliance of oligarchs such as Musk and disaffected working people?

Alberto: It's tricky, as you first need to tease apart the electoral dimension – which is the most obvious phenomenon of far-right ascendancy – but also movements that vary vastly across countries like Argentina or Hungary or India, and whose social and class bases are also not easily comparable. So, I would be wary of making any catch-all statements.

Still, I think there has been an overestimation of the material role of the working class in contemporary fascist movements, not least because the industrial working class in a traditional sense of the term is not particularly large in either Europe or the US. There's also the dubious tendency in much commentary or analysis of treating the fact of not having a university education as a stand-in for class. It turns out that Republican voters in the US, educational certifications notwithstanding, were often in higher-income groups and more often petit bourgeois than workers – in any case, hardly a reactionary army of proletarians.

This is not to say that the far right globally doesn't mobilise a lot of people who belong to the broader working class, which they of course have to do to win elections. But that still doesn't give credence to the idea that the new fascism is the product of some working-class revolt.

Harsha: I strongly believe that it's not an alliance, because there are not many major labour unions that have thrown their formal support behind fascistic movements.

The entire construction of the disaffected white working class comes from Europe and North America, so doesn't hold in most other places. And the 'white working class' itself is a construction of the settler colonial and or ethnostate that presupposes the whiteness of an otherwise multiracial working class.

It's more useful to think through what are the reasons that people who have much more to lose from fascism are finding themselves attracted to or voting for it. Unless we are looking at countries like India, where there is actual and horrifying recruitment in the tens of thousands into massive fascist paramilitaries, largely the pull to fascist ideas is based on a loose and individualised disaffection caused by neoliberalism. That doesn't necessarily mean that each person adheres to the whole fascist programme or policies. We see this perhaps most starkly today with all those people in the US who are saying they did vote for Trump but are now mortified by ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement) kidnappings and terror. It can often also mean that the person is disaffected from the voting electoral system and the false choices presented to them. And as I said earlier, people are also largely attracted to the idea of winning because most people's lives are becoming increasingly precarious.

The last thing I would say is that people's identity today no longer marked by traditional, Fordist ideas of class. Most people do not start by saying 'I am a worker' or 'I am on the shop floor'; they generally claim other primary identities. Fascism increasingly relies on identity construction, such as anti-Black racism and anti-migrant racism to mobilise people into particular identities. Whether it's Bolsonaro, Duterte or Trump, there is a very clear identity construction of who is the 'citizen', which can pull in any person across class lines.

In addition, fascism relies heavily on anti-drug user and anti-poor rhetoric, which both bolsters the carceral industry, while at the same time giving people a sense of superiority over others with whom they share class interests but start to see themselves as separate from and 'better' than the rest. This growing fascism pulls on people's genuine sense of hard work, but weaponises it – with a touch of moralistic policing – to explain that the reason that people have been hard done by is not neoliberalism or capitalism, but due to 'other people' who are relying on the welfare state, or using drugs, or stealing resources. So, the pull for fascism is not primarily on people's identity as workers or the working class, but on the identity construction of the 'generative citizen', generally constituted explicitly *against* migrants and people living in poverty.

Nick: We're speaking just a few days after the illegal US attacks on Venezuela and the kidnapping of Maduro and his wife. How do you understand the relationship between fascism and imperialism and more widely with militarism and the military industrial complex?

Alberto: It's useful here to go back to those continuities between colonialism and fascism that Harsha mentioned. One useful formulation from the study of colonial power come from the work of the subaltern studies historian Ranajit Guha, who in dialogue with Gramsci, uses the formula 'domination without hegemony', which is later borrowed by Giovanni Arrighi in his *Adam Smith in Beijing*.[6] This is the form of power colonialism takes and it's increasingly the default form of power that contemporary imperialism adopts. There's no longer a sense of needing to oversee a relatively stable set of hierarchically organised planetary alliances with the US at its core. Instead, there's a very different perception of US power, which seeks to use its gargantuan military apparatus for openly extortionate plunder even when it's not straightforwardly economically necessary.

The US doesn't need Venezuelan oil. Current oil production in Venezuela is the same as in North Dakota – and it already has companies working there like Chevron. But there is obviously a nostalgia for a cruder modality of nineteenth-century imperialism with a greater degree of straightforward predation, extortion, plunder and piracy. This is an openly fascistic accumulation strategy. And, given Venezuelan oil reserves (the largest in the world) and rivalry with China, there's also a bid for energy dominance – one that entirely denies that very energy transition in which China is taking a leading role.

There's not even any attempt to present a legal veneer for this resource grab. You can see the difference between Bush's Iraq war and its pretence about democracy, compared to Venezuela where Trump is openly clear that 'we're going to keep the oil' (and to keep the money in offshore accounts or 'slush funds' directly controlled by Trump himself). The idea of projecting US soft power, promoting democratic transitions, building alliances, is no longer of any interest.

The current US imperialist model is like a steampunk remake of the US of the nineteenth century, but with Palantir and artificial intelligence (AI) – and with an overarching explicit white supremacist ideology. If you read the US national security strategy, the section on Europe is deliriously reactionary: it argues that European countries will no longer be 'European' in 20 years, purely based on racial categories. Supporting far-right parties is explicitly part of US state strategy.

Trumpian foreign policy also envisages the border as something entirely impermeable in one direction and completely permeable in the other. It merges the war on drugs, war on terror, and war on migration into one endless, protean and fractal war, which is why you had this narrative of Maduro

as the head of a sinister made-up cartel that sends the drugs and the migrants from the prisons and 'asylums' to the US. Apparently Trump had this short circuit whereby he thinks that people who seek asylum come from asylums. That's the delirium and idiocy that we're dealing with. It's all fused together in the context of this Monroe Doctrine 2.0 (aka the 'Donroe Doctrine', a name as stupid as its referent), which says the western hemisphere has to be mastered to face the 'threats' to the US body politic and to secure the resources of rare-earth minerals, oil, etc., that are straightforwardly presented as belonging to the US.

It's a layering of straightforward political economic manoeuvring, power politics, material interests and pure fantastical, ideological demands that are not necessarily in the interest of US capital as a whole. There is a surplus of ideology at work here.

Meanwhile, the rational party of neoliberalism, i.e. the Democratic party, with very limited success, would like to respond by rallying the interests of capital to its side for its more moderate version of imperial strategy, instead of this extremely crude variant.

Harsha: Nice pun play there.

Alberto: Inevitable.

Harsha: As I mentioned earlier, one of fascism's pillars is being counter-revolutionary and explicitly anti-Communist, so we have to understand the attacks on Venezuela in that vein. We know that the Latin American left (understood broadly and from below, beyond individual regimes or leaders) is one of the strongholds to resist US imperialism and specifically US fascism and US hegemonic control. This is true even though we shouldn't romanticise or ignore the many, legitimate independent left-wing challenges to Maduro. So, the US action is part of the desire to make clear to the Latin American left of the power of US domination, as well as assert the supremacist Monroe Doctrine that the hemisphere is 'ours'.

There's another piece here and that is the Caribbean. The Caribbean, particularly Trinidad and Tobago, played an important role in ensuring that this invasion could take place and bolstering the US maritime build-up. So, we shouldn't lose sight of the region's role in wealth accumulation for the US, in particular the way capital is increasingly invested in port economies. We have seen a shift from straightforward resource colonialism to wealth accumulation through the logistics economy and port economies, which have become fundamental to transnational capital accumulation. In addition, we have all the tourist resorts that capitalist interests in the US are very keen on building in the region. So, Venezuela is important to the US not just for its resources, but also because of the pathways to the Caribbean.

Finally, the action is also about punishing US rivals and those with which the US believes itself to be in global competition, such as those in the BRICS countries (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa). So overall, it's about expanding the US frontier, ensuring that the US remains a hegemon, punishing economic rivals, and suppressing left-wing movements. And covering it all up through espousing anti-migrant xenophobia and the rhetoric of a war on drugs and a war on terrorism – which brings us back to some of the core pillars of fascist ideology today.

Why has the war on migrants and also the war on gender been so central to fascist projects in different parts of the world? Why are those themes so constantly being weaponised and turned into victimisation and hate campaigns?

Harsha: The so-called gender wars are so central to fascism because it is an inherently patriarchal project. Patriarchal in the expansive sense: the confluence of the militaristic nation state, a saviour politics, a 'strong man' politics, and pushing regressive gender-based roles and the rise of the manosphere that relies on maintaining and reproducing the gender binary.

And in that sense, the war on trans people is so pivotal to global fascist movements in terms of patriarchal domination in the same way that migrants have become one of the unifying racial markers of how fascism understands itself. If we're to understand fascism, not just in white supremacist contexts, but across the world, we must appreciate that racialisation processes are constructed differently in different places. And across these very different contexts, the migrant has become the figure upon whom racial markers can very easily placed and understood across geographies. So, fascism is built on these systems of othering: against drug users, against trans people, against migrants, which become reproduced as targets for different fascists across time and space.

Anti-migrant racism also offers a particular resolution to the contradictions of neoliberalism as it relates to the migration crisis – in particular the contradiction between borders needing to be open to capital and be shut down to people. Fascism allows capitalism to maintain itself by ensuring that labour remains inflexible and immobile while capitalism moves freely. And that is one of the key reasons why neoliberals really rely on fascist ideology: it ensures that labour can only travel under certain conditions, which usually involves exploitable migrant-worker programmes or guest-worker programmes. Despite what they say, it's not that fascists don't want migrants; they rely on an anti-migrant politics in order to further racism and in order to further the exploitation, precarity and deportability of migrants. The goal is not to deport all migrants because neoliberalism and capital interests and the state require them. But rather to create the conditions for increasing precarity and increasing exploitation as capital seeks increasing populations to segment and exploit.

Nick: I would like to wrap up by asking two questions. First where do you see fractures, fault lines and failings in the rising fascist project that left-wing progressive forces should take advantage of? And second, what are the strategies that you think need to be taken by the left?

Alberto: It's good to keep in mind the reactive or indeed counter-revolutionary character of these fascisms, which is sometimes difficult to discern in our own moment, which is not a time of great revolutionary radicalism. However, it's important to remember that these culture wars as well as the extreme forms of repression we're witnessing are responding to real social transformations and gains, as well as related changes in common sense. So, while there is something both sinister and hyperbolic about transphobia, it's also a response to serious social and political struggles around gender and sexuality that in everyday social life and human relations in many respects have had remarkable transformative successes. Similarly, global fascism is also a response to many moments of uprising or revolt over the past couple of decades, including the Occupy movement, anti-austerity movements in southern Europe, the Arab Spring revolutions, the George Floyd uprising in the US, and so on.

So, the far right is not just a white-supremacist fever dream that's merely projecting monstrous enemies and scapegoats; it's also a response to real social changes and real social power. That's not to neglect the tricky problems this poses for the left, because the far right targets what radicals or revolutionaries or activists would often identify and criticise as liberal co-optations of radicalism, such as diversity, equality and integration (DEI) policies, which emerge as substitutes for the radical changes that insurgent social movements originally demanded. But that's the complicated terrain in which we're fated to struggle.

Beyond that, I do think we need a politics that goes beyond rhetorical agitation. We need to mobilise people around agendas that enable people directly to transform their lives in a direction that's not one of immiseration, precarity and anxiety. So, for all their limitations, it is valuable to put energy into grassroots or municipal political projects where you can build forms of popular power that give people an experience of some transformative control over their everyday life. Otherwise, you are either acting in terrains such as national electoral politics, where the field is asymmetrical and demotivating and where the right usually has an advantage; or limiting opposition to the limited if vital duration of the clash, riot or protest.

Finally, I think it's worth keeping in mind that – apart from some cases such as India – far-right movements are by and large not mass movements with a substantial organised grassroots and institutional components that would be comparable to those of historical fascist movements. They are largely if not exclusively a result of massive levels of political disaffiliation or disaffection; and while they can have a big electoral impact, they are often very feeble at the street or even social level.

Harsha: I have to confess that I'm not very hopeful. I know no one wants to hear it and everyone needs a good story, but I think the task is enormous. The right may not exist as a movement, but it does exist as a force which feels insurmountable at present.

Much of particularly western left-wing debates are fixated on debates about the whether the American Empire is collapsing or not. Frankly, even if it does collapse, there is nothing that will convince me that there is not another sub-imperial power like India that won't emerge as a dominant structuring force that maintains accumulation and empire, as the US did after the decline of European powers, even if it may appear differently.

So, I'm not convinced that with the rise of fascism, capital accumulation, climate crisis, anti-migrant violence, sub-imperialism and colonialism at a global scale that we're going to win.

Of course, the tasks remain the same: we need to be building internationalism. We need to understand how borders are central to every nation state's expanding apparatus of carceral and militaristic violence. It's the linchpin between all fascistic policies and is also increasingly how soft power is projected and enacted across Asia and Africa and the Americas. So, all of those have to be countered and so much more, and the left-wing task of opposing empire while offering people concrete and meaningful alternatives remains true today. But it does now seem much harder, with the forces of empire and violence, the addition of Big Tech control, the rise of right-wing forces globally, and billionaires just accumulating endless wealth.

It's true that it's easy to be trite and end interviews on a falsely positive note, so how do we live this moment in a way that's authentic, honest and embeds the principles you talked about like solidarity. Do you have a final thoughts on that?

Harsha: I appreciate your gesture to honesty. Neoliberalism will continue to position itself as a counter to fascism, and so an unabashed left-wing politics requires honesty about what's next, including the confrontation with both liberalism and fascism and what it will demand of us. The Democratic party, as Alberto was saying, has of course totally failed people *and* also failed to even do what it wants to do.

Yet despite being bleak, we can point to changes such as peoples' understanding of the imperialist role of Zionists in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and an end to the era of largely stifled and muted Palestinian liberation movements in the imperial core. Also, more people understand the naked reality of imperialism and capitalism and policing and borders, which is what so many leftists have fought for at least 30 years to make more visible.

But now our task is perhaps a greater one, which is once people realise it and see how this violence is omnipresent and that empire does not care about how many people are killed or about international law, how do we ensure that people are not taken in by survivalist, lifeboat-type, fascist ideas? Because showing people that shit is bad can often mean that they just want to survive through it because fighting it can feel futile. Which makes alternatives that we are building and creating at localised and small scales even more important precisely for what they do at a psychic and a relational level – they keep us connected to one another and keep our spirits alive and oriented towards transformation.

I also think that at a fundamental level, transforming ourselves and fighting against fascism is understanding that we don't need to be afraid of each other. That's fundamentally what fascism is trying to embed in all of us – fear of others. So, any project that continues to build our human connection and interconnectedness and reminds us that we don't need to be afraid of other human beings on this planet – other than billionaires – is always a worthy project for any time.

Thank you Harsha and Alberto so much for your time and for this conversation.

BIOS

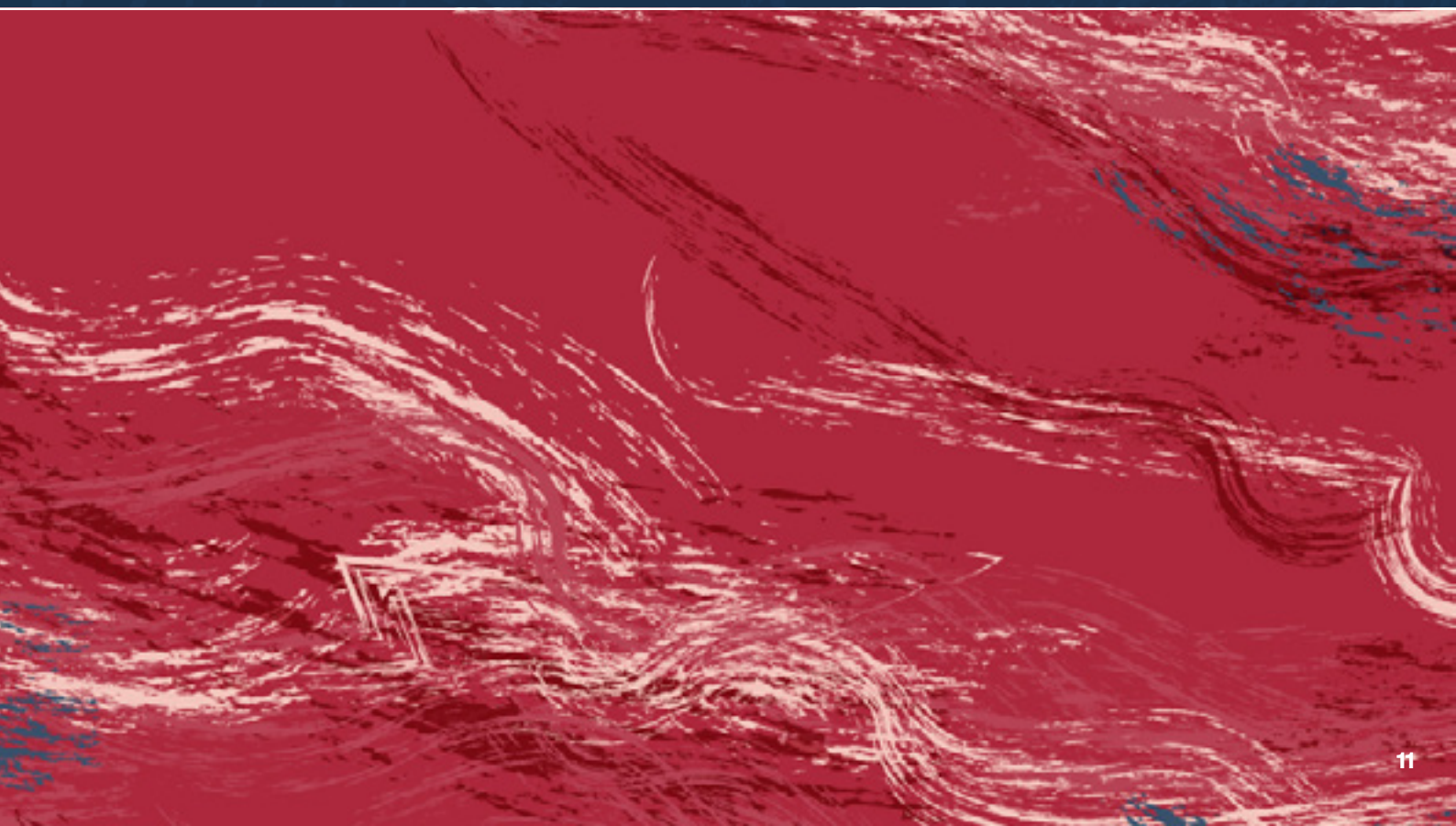
Harsha Walia is a Punjabi activist and writer based in Vancouver, Canada active in migrant justice, Indigenous rights, feminist, anti-racist, abolitionist, Palestinian liberation, and anti-capitalist movements for the past two decades. She co-founded the migrant justice movement No one is Illegal and is author of Border and Rule: Global Migration, Capitalism, and the Rise of Racist Nationalism (Haymarket 2021)

Alberto Toscano is an Italian cultural critic, social theorist, philosopher, and translator. He is an adjunct professor at the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University and author of *Late Fascism: Race, Capitalism and the Politics of Crisis*. (Verso, 2023).

Nick Buxton is founder and editor of TNI's State of Power report and co-editor of *The Secure and the Dispossessed: How the military and corporations are shaping a climate-changed world* (Pluto 2015)

THE RISE OF GLOBAL REACTIONARY AUTHORITARIANISM

Miguel Urbán Crespo



The rise of authoritarian leaders worldwide is the result of an economic and political system of neoliberalism running out of steam and unable to tackle the crises of inequality, precarity, climate collapse and social anxiety that it has created.

President Donald Trump's 2024 election makes him only the second US president since 1892 to be re-elected after a previous defeat. His victory offers insights for a clearer understanding of the new cycle we are in, propelled by the race to the bottom that marks the systemic crisis of capitalism.

We should not view Trump solely as the Republicans' Frankenstein,[7] but rather as the embodiment of a phenomenon – reactionary authoritarianism – that is spreading beyond US borders. It is essential to analyse the victories of Bukele, Bolsonaro, Milei, and Trump not as accidents in the politics of their respective countries, but more broadly, as a political outcome of the attempt to stabilise the structural crisis of capitalism. A crisis marked by the impasse of neoliberal governance and its authoritarian variations, the climate emergency, and the decline of US global hegemony, which, in turn, gives it certain idiosyncratic traits and a planetary scope.

Trump's 'Make America Great Again' (MAGA) slogan is indicative of the current historical moment: the decline of empire. The world in which the US has long dominated global culture and politics is slowly giving way to a new one. Destabilisation is now so severe that we may well be at a turning point in world history. The neoliberal policies that have prevailed since the 1980s are floundering, and the balance between the world powers established following World War II is now broken.

To continue serving the interests of the dominant classes, neoliberalism has taken an authoritarian turn. The structural crisis of capitalism has worsened, pushing aside more progressive neoliberalism and the various colourful waves of globalisation and reinforcing the dynamics of coercion over seduction. The balance between seduction and coercion, which has been a constant in the historical development of capitalism, has clearly moved towards the authoritarian side. Owners have capital have stepped up their offensive to take over all forms of government in order to ensure the restoration of a savage capitalism in which the laws of the market prevail over social rights. In short, this is an attempt to abolish what Marx described as the 'victories of the political economy of labour' to reinstate the political economy of capital.

With each passing day, there is increasing evidence – scientific and empirical – of the ecological emergency we are facing, from the major floods in Porto Alegre in Brazil to those in Valencia in Spain, among many other catastrophes related to global heating. These do not merely herald a grim future, but are the current reality, in which 'the tension between the development of an industrial market society and the biological limits of nature has reached a point where the forces of production have become forces of destruction'.[8] This growing authoritarianism is part and parcel of the ecological crisis, which has profoundly changed the meaning of Francis Fukayama's 'end of history'[9] – from a utopian future of perpetual progress and democracy to a threatening future of unsustainability in the 'Capitalocene'.[10]

The gap between the ever-fewer who are integrated into the global economy and the growing numbers who are excluded from it is one of the main characteristics of our time. The result is an accelerated process of concentration and 'oligarchisation' of power (political, economic, symbolic) and an exponential increase in inequality to a point where it stigmatises and even criminalises people – such as migrants or those living in poverty – who are shunted aside in this savage competition.

This makes it abundantly clear that the existing political blocs have run out of steam, incapable of responding to and/or channelling the distress of growing sectors of society that have been 'dislocated' in the structural crisis of capitalism. This is fuelling the radicalisation of the newly impoverished middle classes along with the already displaced working classes, who vent their discontent through a new form of authoritarianism that focuses not on the future, but on the past – a sort of reactionary nostalgia that offers reactive security in an insecure world.

The oligarchisation of politics

Since the 1960s, the wealthy have invested vast sums in a tight net of foundations, lobbies and think tanks that have laid the cultural and programmatic foundations of the conservative revolution, all based on their growing financial power. This trend has intensified since the 2010 US Supreme Court decision that made it easier to increase campaign spending. This ruling ushered in the era of mega-donors and a cycle of unprecedented political expenditure in which billionaires and corporations influence politics as never before in an accelerated process of oligarchisation and plutocracy.

Trump's 2016 election took the oligarchisation of US politics one step further. The exponential rise in campaign spending was accompanied by what Dylan Riley calls 'political patrimonialism' – in which there is little or no distinction between public and private interests, and where Trump ran his first presidency as if it were one of his own companies:

> Trump's notion of government is precisely patrimonial, in this sense. For him, the relationship of the staff to the leader is not an impersonal commitment to the office of state but "a servant's loyalty, based on a strictly personal relationship". In short, it is familial'.[11]

In the 2024 US presidential campaign, an additional factor was the direct involvement of Elon Musk, the world's richest man. Musk invested an estimated US$ 300 million in supporting Trump's candidacy – and even bought votes in key states such as Pennsylvania. He also used X (formerly Twitter), the social media platform he purchased in 2022, as a powerful electoral weapon in the Republican candidate's favour. This illustrates that Elon Musk uses his privilege to pay to make the world more to his liking, in terms of both his financial interests and his ideological beliefs. Anti-democracy tech multi-millionaires are investing billions and using their companies to sway electoral results in a genuine revolt of the mega-privileged.

Faced with mediocre growth of profits and lower capital accumulation, a sector of the capitalist class has seized direct control of the state apparatus with the aim of using public resources for its own enrichment. Dylan Riley and Robert Brenner refer to this process as 'political capitalism':

> 'Under political capitalism, raw political power, rather than productive investment, is the key determinant of the rate of return. This new form of accumulation is associated with a series of novel mechanisms of *politically constituted rip-off*. These include an escalating series of tax breaks, the privatization of public assets at bargain-basement prices, quantitative easing plus ultra-low interest rates, to promote stock-market speculation—and, crucially, massive state spending aimed directly at private industry, with trickledown effects for the broader population'.[12]

In this context, the state apparatus seems to be the only way for transnational capital to survive in the protracted structural crisis of global capitalism. This is where the accelerated process of oligarchisation and plutocracy comes into play, with the ultra-rich and huge corporations intervening

and making decisions in the political arena as never before. Francisco Louça brings an interesting nuance to Riley and Brenner's concept of 'political capitalism'. He points out that it is precisely a specific fraction of capital, namely the big tech corporations, that most benefit from these politics – and which also control the (re)production of hegemony that seeks to distracts us, and, even more so, through narcissistic alienation. This is the only way to explain why it is precisely the super-oligarchs who own communication and social media networks that control people's lives and who will never relinquish this supreme power. This has given rise to a form of social control unparalleled in human history.[13]

In light of this, Donald Trump's second inauguration, where the front seats that are usually reserved for former presidents and distinguished figures were occupied by the owners of big tech corporations, makes even more sense, and signals a new era. Not only because of the role of lieutenant to the US president played by the world's wealthiest tech oligarch, Elon Musk, who was omnipresent as the head of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) during the first months of Trump's second term, although less so after an impetuous initial spurt; but also because of the definitive inclusion of big tech's corporate power in steering global capitalism.

In less than a decade between Trump's first and second term in office, we have seen the far right grow in strength and, perhaps more importantly, gain new legitimacy around the world. Trump and other members of the reactionary wave are now viewed as legitimate – often privileged – spokespersons for the global elite. They all stand with Trump. Silicon Valley's spectacular switching from pro-Democrat to pro-Trump Republican is a crucial development in contemporary US politics.

This super-oligarchy is expanding its power through so-called 'platform capitalism', which has reconfigured economic, labour, and social relations and consolidated a means of accumulation based on massive data extraction, the power of algorithms, and the dismantling of labour rights. Corporations such as Alibaba, Amazon, Google, Meta (Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, Threads, and WhatsApp),Uber and the rest are clear examples of a paradigm in which the centralisation of platform capitalism and related technology is becoming an instrument of control and surveillance, often beyond the reach of state regulation.

The authoritarian nature of platform capitalism can be seen in many dimensions. In relation to labour, the 'work on demand' model heightens job insecurity, eliminates social benefits, weakens trade unions, and fragments the workforce. These platforms essentially redefine the terms of democratic debate, as they have the power to shape public visibility. Facebook, YouTube, X and all the rest control the algorithms that determine which content will be circulated, when and how. This has significant impacts on public opinion – at least for the growing number who rely on social media for their information and opinions. Cases of electoral manipulation such as the Cambridge Analytica scandal in the UK's 2016 Brexit vote, the disinformation campaigns during the COVID-19 pandemic, and X's modification of its algorithm to favour content that Musk himself wants to promote illustrate how these platforms are used to deliberately erode democratic debate.

Authoritarian capitalism, illiberalism and the asphyxiation of liberal democracy

Nancy Fraser's concept of 'authoritarian capitalism'[14] describes the growing disconnect between capital and democratic institutions, whereby the state no longer acts as a mediator of social and economic interests, but rather as a facilitator of corporate capital by repressing resistance and externalising social and ecological costs. As the economist Dani Rodrik argues, 'either you have globalization or you have democracy', [15]pointing to the impact of decades of financial globalisation on democratic institutions. In the words of Francisco Louça:

> 'If globalisation goes unchecked, sovereignty and democracy will be limited … One of the effects of this crisis of democracy is the rise of the far right. But the destruction of the state's economic capacity also undermines democracy. The financial economy destroys the possibility of people defining their future' [16]

Karl Polanyi had long predicted that in a market economy, freedom would degenerate 'into a mere advocacy of free enterprise', which means 'the fullness of freedom for those whose income, leisure and security need no enhancing, and a mere pittance of liberty for the people, who may in vain attempt to make use of their democratic rights to gain shelter from the power of the owners of property'. [17] This is why the utopian liberal vision can be sustained only through force, violence, and authoritarianism. 'Liberal or neoliberal utopianism is doomed', in Polanyi's view, 'to be frustrated by authoritarianism, or even outright fascism'.[18]

Authoritarian capitalism is not, therefore, a simple regression to earlier forms of domination. It is a new variant, in line with Polanyi's approach to late capitalism, which combines neoliberal elements with centralised, exclusionary and punitive state practices. Governance is shifting towards technocratic and private networks, in which economic criteria are replacing political debate.

The rise of Trump, Bolsonaro, Bukele, Erdoğan, Milei, Meloni, Modi, Netanyahu, Orbán and Putin are just some of the major expressions of a global reactionary wave of authoritarian capitalism, which has contributed to the spread of a new concept: illiberalism. This authoritarianism is expanding across the entire political map, far beyond the confines of the far right. As the sociologist Cas Mudde argues,[19] the new far right is a radicalisation of mainstream views, not in opposition to them.

The US political scientist Fareed Zakaria coined the concept of illiberalism back in 1997.[20] He defined it as a form of government somewhere between traditional liberal democracy and an authoritarian regime, a system in which certain aspects of democratic practice are respected, such as elections, for example; but other equally fundamental principles, such as the separation of powers – legislative, executive, and judicial – are ignored, along with the violation of civil rights. In recent years, in which the far right has been brought to power in various liberal democracies, we have seen how it has gone down the illiberal path, attacking the independence of judges and the media, disregarding minority rights, and undermining the separation of powers.

Attacks on the rule of law and the freedoms of minorities have been a constant in all far-right governments. Government leaders such as Trump and Orbán have all made the assault on democracy their *leitmotif*. The illiberal regime that the far-right parties seek to establish has one specific characteristic: basically ethnocracy – nominally democratic but in which the domination of a particular ethnic group or identity is structurally determined. Here, all the anti-migration or anti-foreigner and anti-minority rhetoric takes on strategic importance for the far right, as it is no longer

a matter of xenophobia that might be broadly based on economic concerns. It also involves a form of nativism that seeks to safeguard a national identity linked not only to a single ethnicity but also to a whole litany of cultural, religious or social 'values'.

To understand the emergence, internationalisation, and force of this global wave of reactionary authoritarianism, we need to analyse the expansion of the neoliberal model of governance for over 40 years, and its influence on the formation of a deeply anti-democratic political culture. The relentless efforts of neoliberalism to expand the state's role in commodification – as well as private economic actors moving to ensure that public authorities and institutions serve their interests – has led to replacing regulation and the most minimal distribution mechanisms with the 'free' market and protection of property rights. Together, they have constituted an assault on political life, the concept of equality, and the commons. In this accelerated process of the oligarchisation of democracy, neoliberal 'anti-politics' is driving the spread of anti-democratic authoritarianism.

It has become commonplace for staunch neoliberal conservatives to question the concept of social justice. An obvious example is Javier Milei in Argentina, who regards the family as the central plank in his social reorganisation plan. We can't forget the 'ordoliberal'[21] dream is of a market-based order, governed by an economic constitution and guided by technocrats, in which the family is an essential element of social organisation because it makes workers more resilient to economic downturns and more competitive in the face of economic adjustments.

When the mechanisms of social cohesion cease to function and it becomes clear that the former prosperity of the middle classes cannot be sustained, authoritarian measures are reinforced to preserve order. At the same time, there is a need for scapegoats (certain minorities, migrants and asylum seekers, feminist movements, LGTBQI+ people) to channel the rage of the declining middle classes towards those just below them. This phenomenon is not entirely new, but it is accelerating and evolving in parallel to the demise of the *belle époque* of blissful globalisation.

The 'crisis imperialism' of the twenty-first century is no longer just about plundering resources. It also strives to isolate the centres hermetically from the 'superfluous' humanity produced by the dying system. Protecting the few remaining havens of relative wellbeing is a key element in imperialist strategies, which involves reinforcing measures of security and control that feed a rise in authoritarianism.[22] Good illustrations include the increased tightening of migration legislation in the European Union (EU) as 'Fortress Europe' and the policy of offshore migration centres, [23], which Trump is also promoting in conjunction with Bukele in El Salvador. These are just two examples of 'necropolitical' neo-colonial ways of controlling migration.[24]

The global wave of reactionary authoritarianism has not emerged in a vacuum. It is deeply marked by the neoliberal radicalisation resulting from the 2008 global financial crisis and its consequences, namely the brutal increase in inequality, the accelerated destruction of social welfare, and the 'dislocation' of people, businesses, and even ecosystems from their places and ways of life.[25] A series of profound economic and social developments have brutally upended politics by destroying old party-based loyalties and consensus and producing tectonic movements and unpredictable realignments. Neoliberal anti-politics are at the basis of the rise of anti-democratic authoritarianism championed by the far right.

The 'dislocated' and reactionary rage

Globalisation has created winners and losers not only on the global gameboard, between the centre and the periphery, but also within the supposedly 'winning' countries, where there is a profound split between those who are positively integrated into globalisation and those who have been displaced by it. The spread of neoliberalism has generated a growing social divide in the labour market, whereby large sectors of society can no longer find their place, which in turn forces them into even more insecurity and lower living standards. Hence, the surge in discontent:

> 'Displacement does not determine that one will vote for the progressive disruptive option or the reactionary disruptive one. Instead, it tends to steer people towards the protest vote or abstention out of disillusionment [...] Similar to the working class, young adults, another large sector of this dislocated group, are in conflict with their relation to work. But in their case, it is because of their inability to enter the labour market or because they do so in conditions well below their qualifications and social background.[26]

The votes of the dislocated are therefore decisive for winning elections because they are found across different social classes and their numbers continue to swell amid rising precarisation. The Brexit vote in the UK and Donald Trump's first election will be forever linked as two electoral earthquakes that marked 2016 and that political analysts were unable – or unwilling – to see. They occurred within months of each other and were driven by a similar electorate: voters displaced by globalisation who turned their anger into a protest vote.

In the wake of the 2024 US elections, a CNN exit poll revealed a very telling piece of information: 72% of those who voted said they were dissatisfied or angry about how things were going in the US.[27] Once again, anger was key to the success of Donald Trump, who reprised his 2016 formula to attract and mobilise protest votes from across essentially white working-class and middle-class voters. A year earlier, Javier Milei had won the elections in Argentina thanks to a real protest vote, in a reactionary revival of the crisis of 2021, with no masses on the streets, but with a lot of social frustration'.[28] This frustration gave rise to 'authoritarian neoliberal individualism', in which Milei's perceived virtue was that he represented anti-politics and anti-politician sentiments.

This anger gradually turns into a reactionary rage, as people believe that they will never be rewarded in the same way as their parents and grandparents were. According to a recent survey of young people in Australia, Brazil, Finland, France, India, Nigeria, the Philippines, Portugal, the United Kingdom (UK) and the US, '[a]round 75% of the interviewees agreed with the statement "the future is frightening", and more than half felt that they would have fewer [sic] opportunities than their parents'.[29] Similarly, a 2021 survey undertaken by Fondation Jean-Juarès indicated that 76% of French citizens believed that France was in decline, and 70% affirmed that 'things were better before'.

The far right feeds on the states of mind captured in these surveys, based on the trope of scarcity – 'there isn't enough for everyone' – to justify a proposal that no longer aims to improve most people's lives, but to simply prevent them from getting worse. This perverse logic pits the poorest against those just above them: who should be protected by the broader society and who should be deprived of this protection? In its current phase of authoritarian neoliberalism, late capitalism is characterised by what the sociologist Saskia Sassen calls a dynamic of expulsions.[30] The expulsion from the 'welfare state' of many sectors of society who had previously been integrated but who are now 'too many'. Expulsions that for some, in particular migrants and those seeking asylum, also mean physical borders.

The model of expulsion and the questioning of the very right to have rights ensure that the reactionary rage caused by neoliberal policies is directed at the weakest (migrants, foreigners, or simply 'the other'), exonerating the political and economic elites, the real culprits of the pillaging. Because if 'there isn't enough for everyone', it is because there are too many people: 'we don't all fit'. A thin line connects the fiction of the policy requirement for austerity to that of exclusion, gradually going from the incriminating visibility of vagrant beggars to the calm invisibility of confined poverty; and from addressing the latter through the welfare state to fighting it by deepening the police state, which stigmatises and criminalises people living in poverty. Exclusion from society at large is legitimised by the energy of resentment and reactionary rage, which are key to understanding the current rise in xenophobia.

The ecological crisis and the (retro)utopian promise of a 'return to the past'

The rise of authoritarianism is, as we said earlier, part and parcel of the ecological crisis, which has changed the very meaning of 'the end of history'.[31] This 'end' is no longer understood as a utopian future of perpetual progress and democracy, but as a threatening one marked by anthropocenic unsustainability. Immanuel Wallerstein has long argued that the cyclical crises of capitalism would become increasingly frequent as they collide with the planet's limits.[32] We can now see this collision in the increase in extreme climate events – such as droughts, floods, heat waves, or famines – caused by the ecological crisis.

The awareness of the fact that nature is finite and that there are limits to how much we can transform, disrupt, and squeeze out of it has thrown into crisis the very paradigm of 'progress' on which modernity has been built. While classic fascism proposed a vision for the future, the current far-right manifestation, faced with growing fears of an uncertain future marked by climate breakdown and a world in crisis, proposes a return to an 'abundant' past, at least for the ill-named 'Western civilisation'; a reactionary proposal that connects with the capitalist utopia of unlimited growth; and of authentic (retro-)utopias, those nostalgic for the state as the protector of the *native population*. If we can no longer aspire to have a better life than our parents, at least we can hope to live like they did. The expectation is no longer to improve, but to avoid getting worse.

The current reactionary moment revolves around the promise of a return to the past to bring back a way of life that was supposed to be guaranteed and that now appears as though it is being denied. The anger at this loss generates a sentiment of grievance, of their rights being ignored, among sectors that had historically enjoyed relative privileges. In fact, the great triumph of this reactionary wave, which Trump exemplifies, is its resuscitation of an authoritarian view of the aspirational lifestyle promoted mainly in the US, based on consumption, stable employment, and access to material goods: the so-called '*American way of life',* which seemed to be on its last legs.

Just when the promise of the American dream is becoming more difficult to fulfil as the assumed US way of life is further eroded, figures who incarnate the image of US success in all its splendour and excess appear. Trump's MAGA slogan and its European adaptation, 'Make Europe Great Again', clearly reflect this idea of a return to the past. It is an essentially decadent message, the expression of power and grandeur that have been lost and that will never return. Thus, the far-right glorification of the past is also a strategy to suppress the possibility of imagining a different future.

While most people around the world are aware of climate change, it is telling that the more the climate worsens, the more climate denial grows. This is because when people are faced with the fears and uncertainties raised by the planet's limits and the ecological crisis – which is ultimately the outcome of the systematic crisis of capitalism that fosters an increasingly reactionary subjectivity – the far right offers both a response and an alternative: an (impossible) return to an 'abundant' past, a promise to restore a way of life that people currently believe they are being denied, while blaming climate policies for the loss of 'our way of life'.

This is where Milei's war cry 'Long live freedom, damn it!' takes the form of a Hayekian appeal. It articulates an 'authoritarian freedom' that expands the private sphere to limit the scope of the political; and calls into question the very existence of the social. It also seeks to intensify reactionary and social sentiments that care nothing about tomorrow, the planet or future generations. This aim to revive a growth-based 'way of life' in the face of an ecological crisis is, as Wendy Brown explains, 'inflected by humiliation, rancor, and the complex effects of nihilism' [...] 'spurred to aggressions unfettered by concerns with truth, with society, or with the future'.[33]

Climate denialism thus feeds the discontent of those who feel threatened by policies to mitigate global warming. -from farmers' tractor protests across rural Europe to people who oppose low-emission zones in urban centres. The concept of 'authoritarian freedom' is used as an ideological tool to justify nihilistic stances: 'I'll pollute what I want', 'when I want', 'because it's mine' and 'it's my individual freedom'. It is where, as Herbert Marcuse explained, the market acts simultaneously as both the reality principle and the moral truth.[34]

Climate denialism has become one of the weapons in the so-called culture wars, in which different discourses are woven together to form an ideology of denialism. Words are not used to describe what exists. Rather, we are witnessing the spread of denialism as an ideology, as an irrational way of being and seeing the world, which the far right propounds and exploits to mobilise passions and voters.

Denialism refutes the existence of climate change and its anthropogenic nature, questions the need for green policies, and minimises the risks of 'business as usual'. It also associates climate policies with supposed elitist or globalist interests to tap into the current anti-establishment revolt that is fuelling the rise of the far right. This allows them to direct farmers' discontent about climate-related policies rather than against free trade agreements (FTAs), and drivers' opposition to low-emission zones rather than cuts in public transport.

A good example is how the former Bolsonaro government used climate denial as the perfect alibi to denounce the supposed 'globalist' attacks on Brazil, represented by international organisations. It allowed it to develop a discourse defending 'national' sovereignty over the Amazon region to fend off international criticism of deforestation, violence against Indigenous peoples, or the entry of agroindustry and agribusiness interests. Mining and agri-food transnationals were delighted by this denialist policy, which violates the rights of Indigenous peoples in the region.

The exponential growth of far-right forces at the international level has inspired a wealth of literature – articles, books, and analysis – on the parallels between the current global reactionary wave and the fascism of the past. This is understandable: the analogy takes us to familiar terrain to analyse the unfamiliar, or at least the new. But this is precisely the problem: we get caught up in the meaning and analysis of the metaphor.

It is true that many of the passions that mobilised older forms of fascism are seen in the new radical right, but there are also important differences that point to a new phenomenon. Whereas fascism proposed a plan for the future, today's reactionary authoritarianism responds to growing fears about an uncertain future marked by climate change and a world in crisis by proposing a return to the past that seems to promise security in an increasingly precarious world. But this security is built and sustained on the insecurity of those defined as 'the other'.

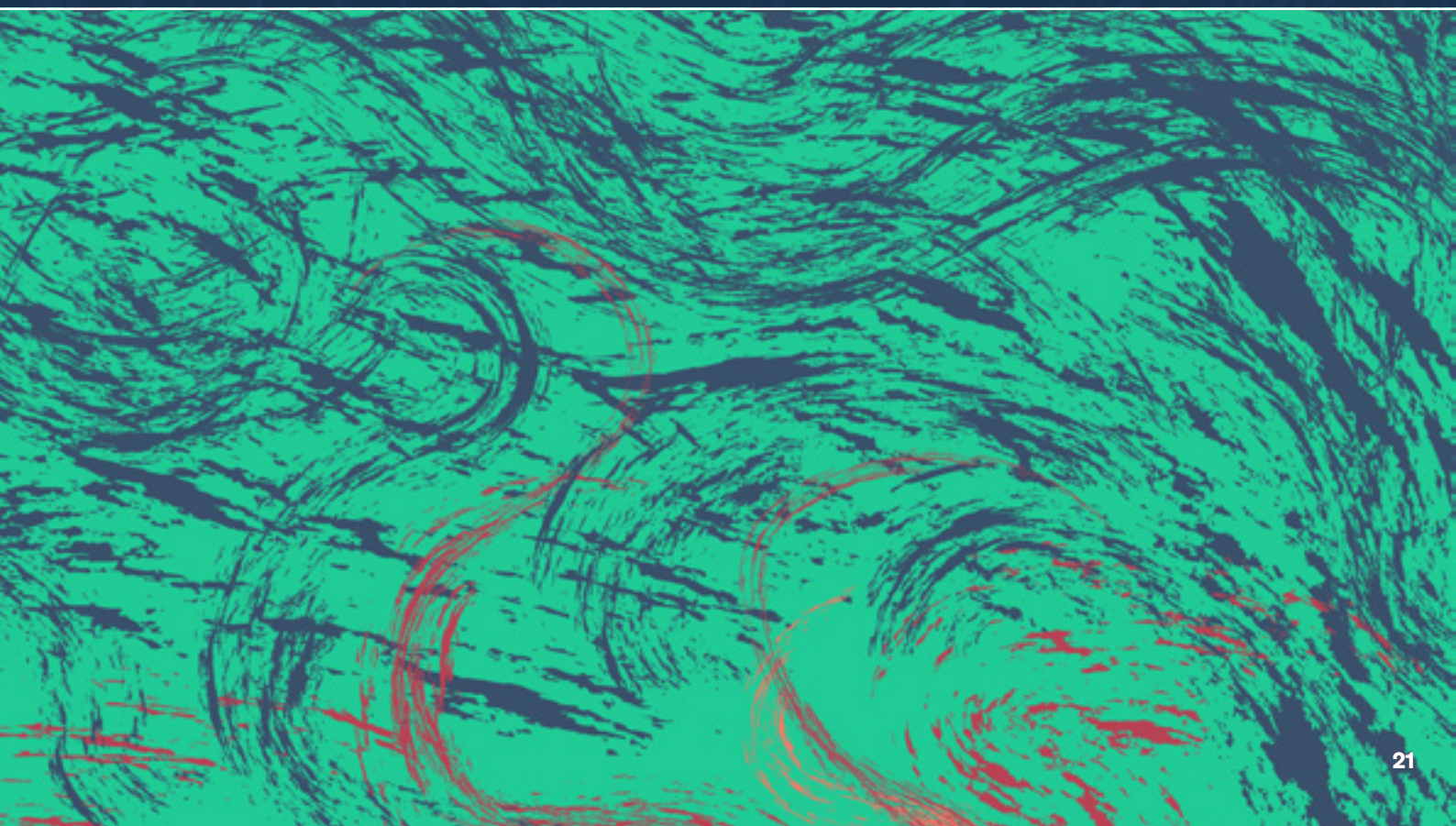
Hence, in the face of the fears, uncertainties, planetary limits, and the ecological crisis, the far right offers an answer and an alternative to regain control: authoritarianism, predominated by a few 'hyper-predatory super-monopolies', as Cédric Durand defines them,[35] whose leading representatives are Donald Trump and Elon Musk. Far from being viewed as an anomaly, the rise of far-right authoritarian forces should be understood precisely as a logical consequence of the systemic crises we are experiencing. These forces signal a new era: one of reactionary authoritarianism, in which nostalgia for an idealised past becomes the lifeline to cling to in a world in flames.

BIO

Miguel Urbán Crespo is a former Member of the European Parliament for The Left (2015-2024). He has written several books of essays, including El viejo fascismo y la nueva derecha radical (Sylone, 2014) and Disparen a los refugiados. The Construction of Fortress Europe (Icària, 2016). His latest book is Trupismos, Neoliberales y Autoritarios (Trupisms, Neoliberals, and Authoritarians).

FOLLOW THE MONEY: The business interests behind the far right

Interview with Théo Bourgeron



Behind the rise in fascism lie particular business sectors such as alternative finance, jostling for power. Understanding the material interests and fractures among elites is critical to developing an anti-fascist politics.

What sections of capital are supporting the far right worldwide?

It depends on countries and capitalist organisations, but broadly speaking you always find a combination of rising economic sectors such as alternative finance, (private equity funds and hedge funds), dominant sectors under pressure (such as fossil-fuel businesses), and those that are dominated, such as small retailers and farmers.

In Western Europe, such as France and the United Kingdom, as well as the United States (US), you find similar configurations with a conflation of billionaires from alternative finance, fossil-fuel, and tech interests supporting far-right movements, often coalesced with less influential sectors such as construction or agriculture.

In Eastern Europe, in countries that occupy a peripheral or semi-peripheral position in the European circulation of capital, far-right movements are, by contrast, supported by construction and agricultural interests, with a significant split between domestic and foreign capital.[36] This means that fractions of domestic capital use far-right rulers to 'take their cut' on flows of foreign capital.

In India, you have a collusion between the ruling ethnonationalist BJP (*Bharatiya Janata Party)* party and large corporations that are looking for a new pro-business, deregulatory agenda.[37] This supports billionaires like Mukesh Ambani, to the point that some are referring to the 'billionaire Raj'.

There are diverse situations, depending on the nation's position. In different countries, the same industry, for instance the same financial sub-sector, might support or not support the local far-right movements.[38] The common feature is that you find businesses that, for various reasons (their recent economic rise not reflected in institutions, the regulatory pressure that they feel, their subordinate position), want to use far-right rulers to challenge economic rivals.

Why have they chosen to reject the mantras of neoliberal globalisation that emphasised free trade, global supply chains, and commitments (albeit superficial) to socially liberal values of diversity, corporate social responsibility etc.? Why have they embraced economic nationalism and social conservatism instead?

The question of the relationship between these business interests and neoliberal institutions is not that straightforward. The post-neoliberalism concept, coined by Will Davies and Nicholas Gane, is really useful to understand the dynamics going on there:[39] you have powerful actors that, at some point, have been interested in questioning the flagship institutions of neoliberalism, not because they oppose the ideological content, but rather because they want to radicalise some aspects of neoliberalism that were there from the start, such as its authoritarian, fossil-based, patriarchal, racist, or ableist nature. This radicalisation is useful to move the fault lines of accumulation, as expanding the regime's authoritarian or patriarchal nature changes the nature of compromises that these business forces have to make with other social groups to maintain their mode of accumulation.

As Gregoire Chamayou has shown in his work on 'ungovernable societies' – which tracks corporate elite responses to the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s – business circles have long felt this tension between preserving the mode of accumulation by buying time through relatively low-cost concessions (i.e. diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), corporate social responsibility (CSR), socially responsible investment) and preserving the mode of accumulation by direct repression. You had a similar situation in the neoliberal counterrevolution, with Chicago Boys like Milton Friedman arguing in favour of an intensification of class struggle against workers, and denouncing measures aimed at buying time, such as CSR. Some business circles now tend to think that it is too costly to buy time again, and so they are shifting towards the latter option.

As for economic nationalism, indeed you find it whether you look at the core of the US empire (in the Trump regime), in semi-peripheral countries (in France, for instance, where Rassemblement National (previously the National Front) clearly wants to replace US tech businesses with domestic ones), and in peripheral areas (in Romania, where the far-right party AUR's bid to power is clearly designed to repress foreign capital and support domestic capital). This tension between domestic and foreign capital is not new, but the regulations that kept domestic capital in check in neoliberal globalisation seem to have faded, starting from the core of the empire, and everywhere you see far-right actors arguing for stronger economic nationalist policies as a result.

What has led historically to this moment?

We are on the edge of a crisis of accumulation. In other words, that investment of capital is no longer producing expanding returns. This is not new; capitalist economies are always on the edge of a crisis of accumulation, but the quick fixes that have been used to mitigate recent crises – increased public and private indebtedness, increased labour exploitation, increased exploitation of nature through greater use of fossil fuels, expansion of the most speculative types of fictitious capital – seem close to exhaustion.

Regime change and far-right rulers are a way to delay the crisis of accumulation further. When you look at Dorit Geva's work on Hungary, you can see that Orban's rule is also a way to intensify exploitation through authoritarianism by strengthening patriarchal structures, thereby extracting more unpaid work from women. It is also very clear from US politics that Trump's MAGA movement is determined to find new ways of accumulation. It provides state sponsorship of crypto-assets, it boosts fossil energy consumption and production, it uses US diplomacy to dispossess foreign capital from subordinated countries. Businesses support far-right movements because they enable them to find further fixes to the looming accumulation crisis.

What are the economic or political interests for businesses to support the far right?

We need to distinguish two levels of analysis to answer that question. First, businesses are looking for favourable institutional arrangements from the state. Businesses are affected by regulation at all stages of their operations and obtaining favourable regulation is crucial. If you take the example of alternative finance (i.e. hedge funds, private equity funds, infrastructure funds) that have been backing far-right parties in the US and Western European countries, its support for far-right movements arises from the need for financial reforms. They want more money to be directed to them at the expense of other banking and financial sectors: they want life insurers and pension funds to be compelled to invest part of their revenue (despite their extremely expansive fees), they want the state to subsidise them through tax cuts. Historically, neoliberal governments have tended

to support traditional banking and finance over alternative finance, so they are looking for other political intermediaries to change this status quo.

Second, and my two levels of analysis are of course interlinked, some sectors of the business community are also looking for regime change. The shape of the political regime constrains the types of institutional arrangement that businesses can obtain, but it also requires constant negotiations with party forces who are in charge of obtaining electoral majorities. When far-right parties like Reform UK in Britain or *Rassemblement National* in France want to authorise fracking or re-authorise oil prospection in the respective country's economic exclusive zone, it goes very well with fossil billionaires' interest, but it is generally opposed by these parties' electoral bases, who would be affected by the ensuing pollution and environmental destruction.[40]

Managing these contradictions is costly, as business has to concede something to other groups in exchange for achieving their regulatory objectives. Changing the shape of the political regime allows for reducing these costs. Criminalising environmental movements, gerrymandering constituencies to lower the bar for an electoral victory, crushing independent media and science, for instance. Although these are have no direct link with these businesses' operations, they have a strong indirect link with the ability of these far-right business owners to make their interests prevail. So, there are often two motivations behind the support of businesses for the far right: obtaining favourable regulation for their specific business model, often at the expense of other sub-sectors and competitors; and transforming the political regime to make their interests easier to promote in the long run.

How are these corporate elites supporting the far right?

There are many ways, and I will illustrate them with a French case. You have indirect ways, which are probably the most powerful and significant. These relate to what Aurelien Mondon and Aaron Winter have described as 'mainstreaming' structures such as the media, academia and think tanks to support the far right by shaping opinions and elections.

The billionaire Vincent Bolloré is typical – using proceedings from his port infrastructures in Africa and his oil-depot interests to obliterate French public debate and the national cultural landscape.[41] He entered the media world in the 2000s and is now the major shareholder in the largest French communication corporation (Havas), the largest European (and French) publishing group (Hachette), the largest French cultural content production (Vivendi and Universal), and one of the largest French media groups (with CNews TV channel, Europe 1 radio broadcast, and the *Journal du Dimanche* newspaper). While he was supported and was and a personal friend of Nicolas Sarkozy in the 2000s, he now very clearly uses these ventures to support far-right parties in France. He even supports parties and voices that are even further to the right than *Rassemblement National*, pitching such parties in competition with each other.

Many other business owners in France support the far right indirectly by funding the galaxy of libertarian, ethnonationalist or white-supremacist think tanks, magazines, and training institutions that are emerging on the far right. Another example is Charles Beigbeder, a multimillionaire, the founder of a private energy company in France and the former head of the start-up lobby *Croissance Plus*, which funded Marion Maréchal, the niece of Marine Le Pen, to launch ISSEP, a private school aimed at training future French far-right elites.

But you also have more direct ways of supporting the far right. Far-right parties need funding to run for elections and these businesses provide credit or direct financing. And having a billionaire on

side is helpful in other ways. The French billionaire Pierre-Edouard Stérin and his business partner François Durvye, for example, recently bought Marine Le Pen's family mansion in Saint-Cloud at a seemingly overvalued price to support her ventures. Vincent Bolloré also opened the doors of his Paris mansion, in the Villa Montmorency gated community, to host the talks between *Rassemblement National* and the traditional right-wing party *Les Républicains* during the 2024 snap legislative elections. Eric Ciotti, then president of *Les Républicains*, ended up betraying his party and rallying *Rassemblement National* with some MPs from *Les Républicains*. This is a very direct form of influence.

What has been the response of other sections of capital, such as those who supported Macron in France or Kamala Harris in the US? Can they live with the nationalist right? What would happen if it was a choice between the far right and a socialist left?

The first thing to say is that there is a struggle between fractions of the business class, and this is a real struggle. So, other fractions of capital are unhappy, of course, with the rise of the far right, because in losing elections, they most importantly lose their hegemony over the power bloc and become subordinated sectors.

The second thing is that these struggles within the business community are very different from the struggles between capitalists and workers. The struggle within the business community never really stops. It reshapes hierarchies within power blocs: some dominant groups become subordinated and some of the latter rise to hegemony. But it is still a power bloc that requires exploitation, dispossession, and speculation in various proportions to continue accumulating.

In the UK, as Marlène Benquet and I show in our book *Alt-Finance*,[42] around the Brexit vote and the Boris Johnson government, there was a conflict between hardliners and moderates in the Tory party, which echoed a broader conflict within the British financial sector between alternative finance and the traditional banking and financial sectors. The former group of businesses and politicians won over their opponents, but it didn't lead to the collapse of traditional British banking and insurance. Hedge funds and private equity funds got rid of the Alternative Investment Fund Managers (AIFM) European directive[43] after Brexit, a move that they had long awaited. Big banks and insurers lost access to markets across the European Union (EU), with which they disagreed, but this was not the end of the world. The British Venture Capital Association (BVCA), the private equity lobby, managed to propose reforms that would compel pension funds, insurers and bankers to invest more of the revenue they collect in their funds. Traditional banking and financial actors were not necessarily happy about this. This was a spectacular shift in power hierarchies in British business, as alternative finance funds were historically just small spin-offs from big banks. But traditional finance businesses realigned and accepted the new order.

As for the alternative between the far right and the socialist left, this is a relevant question. Business-sponsored far-right movements seek a new social arrangement that protects private property. In Hungary, for instance, Orbán was initially a classical centre-right, pro-business member of parliament (MP). He has turned to the far right to establish a new social contract between sectors of capital and other social groups that would prevent social unrest while preserving accumulation – shielding the 9% corporate tax for foreign corporations, making domestic fortunes happy with the distribution of state-owned land and interests, and keeping a stable social order through authoritarian and reactionary politics. There is an opposition between far-right, post-neoliberal politics and traditional, neoliberal politics; however, this is not a death-match, but rather a tactical split within the business

community. The limited nature of this opposition has been obfuscated by ideological approaches focused on party propaganda and voters' motivations, which look at reactionary movements with concepts of 'populism', 'anti-neoliberal counter-movement', or 'anti-elite right-wing movements'. As I have written recently, these approaches are limited and should be complemented with materialist understandings of the far right.[44]

If you go beyond discourse and look at business interests, you discover that indeed business actors tend to prefer realigning behind far-right winners than risking a socialist government with a serious intent to redistribute wealth and socialise production.

Are we seeing the emergence of significant fractures in capital?

These fractures actually occurred many decades ago and the competition between reactionary, post-neoliberal movements and traditional, neoliberal politicians is just the tip of the iceberg. In the book *Alt-Finance*, we show that the conflicts between Tory hardliners (both the right wing of Tory party such as Liz Truss and self-styled outsiders like Nigel Farage) and supposed moderates (like David Cameron) within British politics resulted from long-standing opposition within the UK's business community, and especially within its almighty financial sector.

The opposition in the financial sector was there from the start, in the 1980s, when big banks started creating in-house private equity funds to secure more returns, and then quickly had to spin them off. They had to give them organisational autonomy, because the banks cannot own private equity funds. In order for their business model to work, they need to raise money from actors that are competing or have conflicts of interests with the banks' owners – all good reasons to be independent.

These alternative finance actors developed distinctive political economy interests owing to how they are remunerated – hedge funds and private equity funds are not interested in high interest rates, as banks are, nor in high-asset values, such as BlackRock and other mainstream asset managers – they are interested in volatility and returns.[45] This requires very specific politics. In 2022, banks and traditional asset managers lost billions of pounds after the short-lived UK prime minister Liz Truss' mini-budget, whereas hedge-fund bosses reportedly drank champagne with her Chancellor of the Exchequer, Kwasi Kwateng, the evening it was announced. So, there is a very fundamental opposition of business model between these two sides of finance.

Between the 1980s and the mid-2010s, alternative finance in the UK kept growing despite its subordinate position. It raised increasing funds, accumulated wealth, generated its own billionaires, created its own professional lobby, funded its own think tanks, and got its own alumni into politics. At some point, the sector ended up being more influential and powerful than traditional finance, and it wanted its interests to be respected, so there was a conflict in the British business community, which explains some of the UK politics of the mid- and late-2010s. So, the competition between neoliberals and post-neoliberals, traditional centre-left/centre-right movements and far-right movements, reveals existing fractures in capital.

You find it in other places than the UK. When Vladimir Bortun and Dorit Geva talk about the opposition between domestic and foreign capital in Romania and Hungary, and its impact on far-right politics, this is also a significant fracture in capital. When Quinn Slobodian talks about 'the backlash from above' by industrial groups such as the steel industry, against neoliberal globalisation in the US, this is also what he refers to.[46]

How has the far right governed economically? What neoliberal orthodoxies have they maintained and which have they discarded? What common threads and differences do we see?

When you look at research on existing far-right regimes in countries such as Austria, Hungary, or the US, you find that these regimes try to accommodate their business bases and their electoral base together. In Hungary, for instance, the regime has preserved the ultra-low corporate tax that benefits large Western corporations, handed capital and profits to its domestic oligarchs, while fostering the interests of specific subsets of the population based on gender or geographical fault lines.[47]

In the US, you find out that the two Trump administrations are largely rewarding the sectors (and sometimes the individuals) who have supported them. The steel industry, for example, which was unhappy with the World Trade Organization (WTO) trade rules, were finally rewarded with the tariff push and trade wars. In addition, the Trump administration has tried to reward other industries (in tech, finance, energy) that have supported the far right through favourable regulation and even direct rewards. In these different cases, the common thread is that the business base benefits hugely more than the electoral base.

Here, Inga Rademacher's work on finance and the far-right is also hugely interesting.[48] She shows that the relationship between far-right movements and financial sectors varies depending on the country. In some cases, far-right governments (or aspiring parties) build coalitions that clearly include the interests of the financial sector (or some of its subsets, such as asset-manager corporations), while in others they are backed by power blocs that want to contain the expansion of the financial sector. It really depends on the business and electoral structure of the country.

How have these far-right economic policies affected ordinary people?

The category of 'ordinary people' is not appropriate here, because far-right economics produce diverging outcomes on different social groups. Whether you look at Austria, Hungary, Türkiye, or the US, the far right overall intensifies exploitation for the working class. The far right develops exclusionary policies that remove access to welfare services to various segments of the population. It strengthens the power of corporate owners and managers by widening the divide between national, migrant-legal, and migrant-illegal workforces. It also represses unions and social movements. In 2024, in Italy, Giorgia Meloni's government passed extremely stringent laws criminalising protest and political dissent, for instance. It intensifies the logics of exploitation of unpaid work by supporting male domination. There might be subsets of the population that are better off, because far-right economics aims to redistribute value among social groups. But far-right policies tend to be regressive, and thus deteriorate the situation of dominated groups.

Can the far right do enough economically to secure popular hegemony?

When you look at power blocs behind far-right regimes, there are strong contradictions within them and indeed it is very hard to make these diverging interests work together. My recent work on the French far-right bloc (forthcoming) shows that there are three layers in the emerging power bloc – the top layer of billionaires from tech, alternative finance, and fossil energy, then the intermediary layer of small business interests, and finally the business base of petit bourgeoisie and working-class voters.

These three layers are clearly contradictory. You have a contradiction between the farmers of the intermediary layer and the financial investors of the top layer: the farmers' lobby that is close to

Rassemblement National, *Coordination Rurale*, clearly campaigns against the financialisation of agriculture, whereas investment-fund supporters *of Rassemblement National* have agricultural assets. You find the same conflict between the top two layers and the electoral bloc; a big part of the far-right French programme consists in de-taxing inheritance and fostering the value of real estate and land ownership, but a large part of its electoral support owns no real estate and is not subject to inheritance tax.

These blocs are also hierarchical, however, with the large capitalist class being the hegemon and the various components of the electoral coalitions being subordinated actors, 'junior claimants' to speak in financial terms. Theirs are the interests that come last.

This does not mean, however, that these far-right blocs are doomed to lose power or disappear, because the role that such electoral coalitions play also evolves. By handing the media to friendly oligarchs, by gerrymandering electoral constituencies, by targeting opponents, far-right regimes transform the rules of the electoral game and make it less costly for hegemonic groups within the bloc to win elections. This is why I don't think it is just about 'popular hegemony'. There is no such thing in far-right regimes. You can disorganise social movements and atomise the social structure in such a way that hegemonic groups can keep their power bloc functioning for very little cost. This is power but is clearly not 'popular hegemony'.

As popular movements look to confront and defeat fascism and the far right, how might our understanding of far-right economic interests shape our response? Are there fractures or contradictions we can take advantage of? Are there ways we can use it to undermine the far right's popular support?

There are two responses to this question. First, mapping far-right economic interests is crucial to understand the nature of the challenge and dissipate the misunderstandings of the 2010s. It is very important to know where the far right comes from and what it stands for. It is important because if we think that it is driven by groups of working-class voters from de-industrialised areas, we might end up focusing on community organising to struggle against racism in these areas. But if we think it comes from above, if we think it is organised in a top-down manner, as Aurélien Mondon and Fran Amery rightly argue,[49] then working-class votes are actually driven by another force, which is the billionaire-owned media system. Consequently, the struggle will take a very different shape, trying to create alternative media organisations and advocating for new media and electoral regulations.

Second, this endeavour to analyse the far right is also useful to understand contradictions. Far-right regimes are defeated by various events: elections, social movements, foreign interventions. Social movements raise the cost for hegemonic groups and their party representatives to hold the different components of the bloc together. In a forthcoming work by Vladimir Bortun and I, we show that in countries such as France and the UK, there are three sectors at the core of the far right: alternative finance, domestic tech, and fossil-energy actors. It is very costly for these actors to engage in political action – it requires significant profit, extracting this profit in individual wealth, then investing in political organising through building infrastructures, such as think tanks and lobbies. Political action that targets these actors' business model is really important.

Even without this awareness, people who struggle against the financialisation of housing, the monopoly power of tech sectors, fossil-fuel production and consumption, are also contributing in

a crucial way to the struggle against the far right. They make it harder for the far-right ecosystem to sustain itself, they create coalitions that these industries will have to spend money to dismantle, and they raise their costs. So, while this type of analysis does not lead to new political action, it helps direct our efforts.

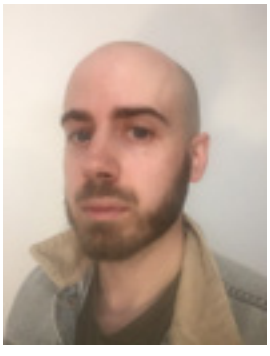
The right nowadays advances its position through culture wars, capturing the language and critiques of the left but directed it towards racist, oppressive, and xenophobic ends. How is your argument useful to understand such circumstances?

The problem is not only the right capturing the language and critique of the left, but also the left developing reactionary arguments – we have seen that in public health around COVID-19 mandates. In my view, it is really important that these new works on the relationship between businesses and the far right do not remain limited to economic or even political aspects but are also developed to shed light on today's cultural struggles. When I say cultural struggles, I mean that we should absolutely break away from idealistic visions of far-right movements, but at the same time develop a materialist reading of the ideological dimensions – the political ideologies, culture, and technoscientific knowledge – of reactionary regimes today. This means understanding how these far-right economic interests generate ideologies that the left should neutralise.

This can seem very abstract, so let me illustrate my argument. Recently I was struck by Fabian Muniesa's book, *Paranoid Finance*.[50] He explores the NESARA/GESARA movement, a 'conspiracy theory' that contends that the US federal state was abolished 20 years ago, that US citizens actually have a right to redeem a certain amount of gold at the Federal Reserve, and that the 'deep state' is preventing an anarcho-capitalist utopia where US citizens trade freely without a state using bullion currencies. Muniesa contends that NESARA/GESARA expresses in its purest form the radical theory of value of today's mainstream financial world. In other words, he makes a direct link between economic processes (how 'value' is 'extracted' by the financial sector in today's world) and culture (how some people forge evidence that the state has been abolished and we should live in an anarcho-capitalist utopia). This is very important work because it draws a link between the economic processes at the core of today's capitalism and all those libertarian and anarcho-capitalist speculations that we see multiplying in the far right of the political spectrum. It helps us understand the ideologies on which these new reactionary, post-neoliberal regimes rely from a materialist perspective. We need to develop a materialist understanding of far-right culture – how the most contemporary far-right business interests translate into culture today – to think about how to counter far-right cultural forms in the most efficient manner.

BIO

Théo Bourgeron is a Chancellor's Fellow at the University of Edinburgh. He studies the relationships between businesses and the far-right in sectors as diverse as finance and pharmaceuticals. He has recently published Peak Pharma, an Oxford University Press book on the politics of pharmaceuticals, and an article on "Economic Sociology and the Far-Right".



AUTHORITARIAN EXTRACTIVISM IN INDIA: Land, Energy, and the Making of a Far-Right Development Regime

Rohith Jyothish

Fascism does not only express itself in nationalist rhetoric, persecutions of minorities or the undermining of democracy, but also in how it transforms land, water and energy systems. India under the BJP has intensified a system of authoritarian extractivism that dispossesses marginalised communities behind a rhetoric of civilisational ascent.

Authoritarianism is often described through familiar institutional markers such as weakened courts, executive dominance, media capture, police impunity, and the shrinking of civic space. These dimensions matter, but they do not tell the whole story. Authoritarian projects are sustained not only by nationalist rhetoric or electoral strength but by material transformations of land, water, forests, and energy systems. What distinguishes the contemporary Indian moment is that extractive statecraft is being reorganised within a far-right political formation. Procedural acceleration under previous regimes was framed as technocratic growth; the far-right adds an identity grammar that transforms technical projects into moral imperatives. Development becomes proof of Hindu civilisational ascent; dissent becomes disloyalty not only to the state but to the Hindu nation; and specific groups – Adivasis (Indigenous peoples) who resist, Muslims who occupy contested land, 'outsiders' framed as threats – are marked as impediments to national destiny. This identity-centred justification intensifies the delegitimisation of dissent and expands the moral license for coercive extraction.

India is a critical site for understanding this dynamic. Since independence, major infrastructure projects – dams, steel plants, ports, mines, special economic zones (SEZ) – have been justified in the name of national development. But over the last 40 years, the relationship between extraction and politics has sharpened in distinct ways. Land acquisition has become more central to statecraft; dissent is more frequently recast as obstructionist or 'anti-national'; public finance increasingly protects private investors; and new forms of surveillance and policing shape how communities resist. These trends pre-date the present government but have intensified under it, producing what can reasonably be described as authoritarian extractivism: a development regime that combines accelerated appropriation of land and resources with the political logic of majoritarian nationalism.

This essay aims to show that the Hindutva variant differs in practice from neoliberal forms of accelerated extraction associated with centrist or technocratic governments. While procedural compression, investor de-risking and fast-tracking clearances have been features of many developmental states, the far-right adds an ideological and organisational scaffolding that changes both effects and targets. The far-right inflection works by (1) sacralising certain projects within a majoritarian cultural narrative so that opposition is delegitimised as betrayal; (2) prioritising dispossession that simultaneously reorders citizenship and belonging; and (3) enabling networks of state and extra-state actors – vigilantes, corporates with political clout, sympathetic judicial interventions – to close off democratic redress in ways that earlier neoliberal projects did not systematically institutionalise.

This Indian trajectory has more than domestic implications. The historical durability of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) networks, India's economic footprint, and dense diasporic and institutional ties with English-language policy circuits make its far-right model a potential source for lessons, templates, and instruments for other states and corporate actors worldwide.

What is 'Authoritarian Extractivism'?

India's contemporary conflicts over land, forests, water, and energy unfold within longer histories of resource-led development, but they are now shaped by a political logic that earlier literature on 'extractivism' or 'authoritarianism' treats only partially. Classic accounts of extractivism emphasise the appropriation of land and commons, the restructuring of institutions to enable capital flows, and the displacement of environmental costs onto marginalised groups and populations. They help explain why dams, mines, industrial corridors, and now renewable energy parks, consistently produce dispossession. Yet these accounts often bracket the political cultures and ideological forms through which dispossession becomes legitimate.

Conversely, work on authoritarianism focuses on electoral manipulation, institutional capture, media control, and the repression of dissent. It illuminates how coercive power is consolidated but tends to treat infrastructures, land acquisition, and ecological transformation as secondary rather than constitutive.

Bringing these strands together clarifies something that neither captures alone – the way large-scale resource projects can become a primary vehicle for producing authoritarian authority itself. When megaprojects are framed as national destiny, as climate necessity, or as civilisational renewal, resisting them becomes politically risky. Protestors are recast as obstacles to development, as agents of external influence, or as threats to social cohesion. This discursive reframing is not rhetorical excess; it is a political technology that enables states and corporations to reorganise territory while narrowing the legitimate space for democratic contestation.

The term *authoritarian extractivism* therefore refers to a political configuration in which infrastructures, regulatory reforms, investment pipelines, and public narratives are aligned to expand state–corporate control over land and resources, while simultaneously contracting the space for democratic negotiation. Extractivism supplies the material project; authoritarianism supplies the enabling political environment; and each deepens the other. This is not a regime type but a mode of governance that can arise within formally democratic settings, provided that institutions, finance, and ideology converge to privilege accumulation-by-dispossession.

In this sense, authoritarian extractivism is a useful lens for India today because it makes visible the linkages across what appear to be disparate conflicts. Disputes over dams, solar parks, Indigenous territories, ports, conservation enclosures, and urban demolitions often share the same pattern, of discursive delegitimising of dissent, procedural shortcuts, financial de-risking for private actors, and the increasing involvement of security, intelligence, or judicial bodies in matters that were once considered developmental or environmental. In far-right projects, these structural mechanisms are ideologically weaponised to produce moral clarity on who belongs, and who does not, thereby legitimising dispossession in a way that aligns with a majoritarian political programme.

Gujarat as Template: How Development Became a Cultural Project

Gujarat's experience with the Sardar Sarovar dam on the Narmada River is useful because it shows how developmental conflict can be reframed as a cultural and moral question. During the 1980s and 1990s, resistance to the dam, led by the Narmada Bachao Andolan (NBA), collided with a political project that sought to define Gujarati identity around pride, modernisation, and Hindu unity. This convergence would later shape national politics, but in Gujarat it first became visible.

What makes Gujarat foundational is that the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) transformed a conflict about development into a vehicle for consolidating a Hindu majoritarian bloc – something qualitatively different from earlier Congress-era developmental authoritarianism. The dam was not only an infrastructural promise; it was woven into a far-right narrative of Hindu resurgence, Muslim exclusion, and regional pride. This linking of territory, identity, and infrastructure became a hallmark of India's far right extractivism.

The Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) was promoted as a civilisational undertaking, a lifeline that would irrigate drought-prone regions and lift the state into a new era of prosperity. State agencies, business associations, and regional media repeatedly portrayed it as the embodiment of Gujarati aspiration. Questioning the dam was therefore recast as questioning the future of Gujarat itself. This moralisation of development made the cost of dissent unusually high, long before coercive measures were deployed.

The NBA's critique – which focused on displacement of Adivasi communities, submergence of forests, flawed environmental assessments, and inequitable resettlement – ran headlong into this cultural scripting. Activists were branded 'anti-Gujarat', 'anti-development', or simply outsiders manipulated by urban non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Ground-level accounts show that dissent was reframed as betrayal, closing political space. This rhetorical move mattered because it blurred the line between disagreement and disloyalty, allowing the state to treat legitimate democratic protest as obstruction.

The political climate of Gujarat in this period made such delegitimising easier. The decades-long reorganisation of caste coalitions had weakened the Congress Party's KHAM alliance (Kshatriya–Harijan–Adivasi–Muslim), which previously gave marginalised groups leverage in the state. As this coalition frayed, the BJP positioned itself as the representative of Gujarati pride, offering a unifying Hindu identity that transcended caste divisions. Developmental projects like the SSP became symbolic anchors for this identity. They allowed the BJP to articulate modernisation, cultural assertion, and territorial transformation within a single narrative.

Institutional power followed. Over time, courts, police, and administrative bodies increasingly approached the dam as an unquestionable imperative. Critics describe how hearings became formalities, environmental conditions were waived, and accountability mechanisms were weakened. The state maintained a procedural façade – impact assessments, resettlement packages, legal appeals – but these processes often concluded with the affirmation of the project, even when evidence suggested otherwise. This combination of administrative narrowing and rhetorical delegitimising effectively closed space for dissent, pushing opposition into smaller pockets of civil society and among affected households.

Internal fissures within the NBA further reduced its leverage. Some Adivasi communities viewed the movement's urban leadership with suspicion; others found state compensation insufficient but saw few viable alternatives. The movement's heavy reliance on legal strategies – operating within the language and timelines of state-defined proceduralism – meant that once courts favoured the project, pathways for resistance narrowed further. The result was not simply defeat but fragmentation, as communities faced difficult choices shaped by coercion, inducement, or fatigue.

None of this was unique to Gujarat. Displacement struggles have long confronted similar dynamics across India. What made Gujarat distinctive was the tight fusion of cultural nationalism with the politics of development. The dam became a symbol of collective pride, a vehicle for reconfiguring

caste alliances, and an instrument for marking political insiders and outsiders. State coercion and non-state vigilantism operated alongside this ideological framing, reinforcing a climate in which development projects could be pursued with limited accountability.

When Narendra Modi became Chief Minister in 2001, these dynamics intensified. The SSP featured prominently in his political rhetoric, framed as evidence of decisive leadership and Gujarat's exceptionalism. Administrative reforms centralised authority, accelerated clearances, and curtailed spaces for negotiation. These practices later travelled with him to Delhi – not as a blueprint to be copied wholesale, but as a political sensibility. Gujarat, in this sense, functions as an early crystallisation of a political logic that now shapes conflicts across India.

The following section shifts from this regional narrative to the national landscape, where these patterns appear not as isolated incidents but as recurrent features of India's resource politics.

India's National Landscape: A Resource Politics of Everyday Dispossession

If Gujarat revealed a political logic, the national picture shows its scale. Across India today, struggles over land, water, forests, and urban space form a dense map of conflict. Land Conflict Watch, a national database maintained by a research collective tracking land and resource disputes, shows hundreds of ongoing conflicts involving infrastructure, power projects, mining, conservation zones, and industrial corridors. They reveal what development looks like on the ground, with competing claims over territory, the defence of the commons, and the incremental shrinking of political space for those already at the edge of citizenship – Adivasi communities, pastoralists, small farmers, informal workers, and urban residents without formal tenure.

Across these conflicts, several recurring features stand out. First is the centrality of infrastructure. Highways, logistics hubs, industrial corridors, ports, and urban re-development projects account for a large share of land acquisition. In many regions, these projects are promoted as evidence of a country moving forwards – proof of modernisation and global competitiveness. But the lived experience is more ambivalent. Infrastructure often re-routes rivers, fragments grazing lands, or displaces neighbourhoods that lack formal titles. In peri-urban areas, residents may be served eviction notices only after construction fences appear. The legal status of land, whether it is recorded as public, private, forest, pastoral, or 'wasteland', frequently decides whose rights count and whose can be overridden. For many affected communities, development arrives not as opportunity but as a tightening circle of enclosure.

Second is the growing weight of energy projects, especially renewable energy. India's energy transition has been framed as both a global climate responsibility and an economic opportunity. Wind parks in coastal districts and solar installations in semi-arid regions have expanded rapidly. Yet these projects often require large tracts of contiguous land, and the burden of acquisition falls on pastoralists, Dalit agrarian labourers, and Adivasi farmers whose livelihoods depend on common lands. In Rajasthan's desert districts, for example, solar parks overlap with grazing routes used by nomadic herders. In Kutch, on India's western coast, wind turbines have been erected on lands historically used by Maldhari pastoralists; the installation of security posts and fencing alters not only access but the symbolic meaning of the landscape. Research has shown that renewable energy can reproduce many of the same patterns associated with mining or large dams, such as land conversion without adequate consultation, uneven distribution of benefits, and the creation of new fault lines between local people and state–corporate consortia.

A third national pattern concerns the commons used collectively for grazing, firewood, seasonal farming, fishing, or cultural practices. These landscapes seldom appear in official land records or are classified generically as 'wastelands', a term historically used to designate anything not formally under cultivation. This bureaucratic label has profound political consequences. Once land is marked as 'wasteland', it becomes easier for the state to transfer it to corporations or parastatal agencies for plantations, solar parks, industrial projects, or compensatory afforestation. In many cases, these 'waste' areas are integral to household survival, especially for women whose everyday labour in gathering fuel, fodder or minor forest produce sustains families. When the commons are enclosed, shared spaces where communities meet, graze animals, perform rituals, or maintain ecological knowledge are replaced by sites to which they no longer have access.

The fourth recurring feature is violence and intimidation, sometimes overt and sometimes administrative. Forced evictions – often carried out with police presence – are frequent in both rural and urban contexts. Arrests and detentions of activists are regularly recorded in disputes involving forests or conservation zones. In regions with high Adivasi populations, such as central India, the Forest Rights Act (FRA),[51] which was meant to secure community claims over forestland, has been unevenly implemented; rejections of claims or evictions from 'encroached' forest areas often coincide with new mining proposals or tiger reserves. In cities, informal settlements are demolished under the banner of 'beautification' or environmental restoration, sometimes days before court hearings that might have stayed the demolition.

Taken together, these patterns show that resource conflict in India is a story of layered vulnerability. Who is displaced, who is heard, and who is allowed to remain depends on intersecting identities – caste, tribe, class, gender – and on the bureaucratic categories under which land is recorded. An Adivasi household farming a forest edge, a pastoralist community grazing livestock on salt flats, a Dalit or Muslim settlement without formal titles on the outskirts of a city – each faces different pathways of exclusion, but the underlying mechanisms look remarkably similar.

Urban demolitions, often called 'bulldozer actions', extend this pattern into city ecologies. Presented as enforcement against 'encroachments' or as post-violence punishment, they overwhelmingly target Muslim neighbourhoods and informal settlements lacking documentary tenure. These demolitions operate through the same mechanisms: administrative speed that pre-empts legal challenge, discursive reframing that casts residents as outsiders or security threats, and the conversion of city space into a terrain for asserting majoritarian order. They also constitute a form of extractivism as they are clearing land for redevelopment, raising property values, and reconfiguring who is permitted to inhabit urban space. In the far-right political landscape, bulldozers become both an instrument of dispossession and a performative symbol of Hindu majoritarian authority.

At the same time, it is important not to romanticise resistance as a series of heroic uprisings. Many communities engage in slow, everyday negotiation. They file objections, produce documents, appeal to sympathetic officials, or organise locally to delay acquisition. Others prefer compensation because agricultural incomes are low and climate variability makes farming difficult. Still others resist until the last possible stage, only to find that roads have been built around them or construction has already begun. The politics of land is rarely a simple yes/no binary. It is a terrain of unequal bargaining power shaped by decades of state practices, legal categories, and economic pressures.

The national landscape, then, reveals two things. First, that India's developmental pathway is deeply extractive, even when wrapped in the language of sustainability; and second, that conflicts over land and resources are not exceptions but expressions of a political economy in which dispossession is a recurring mode of governance.

How Dispossession is Made Legitimate: The Mechanisms of Authoritarian Extractivism

Across India, the expansion of infrastructure, energy, conservation, and industrial projects succeeds because a set of discursive, legal, financial, and administrative practices work together to make dispossession appear inevitable, reasonable, or even virtuous. These practices do not always originate with authoritarian rule. Their power lies in the way they convert contested transformations of land and livelihoods into routine acts of governance. Four mechanisms recur across diverse conflicts.

The first is discursive normalisation: the reframing of projects as national imperatives that lie beyond debate. Large dams were once called 'temples of modern India'. Today, solar parks, expressways, 'smart cities', and deep-water ports are described as essential to India's emergence as a global power or to meeting planetary climate goals. These narratives structure how officials write environmental assessments, how newspapers report protests, and how courts weigh competing claims. When a transhipment port is presented as critical to India's strategic presence in the Indian Ocean, or when a solar park is described as indispensable to decarbonisation, objections raised by local communities are reframed as obstacles to national progress rather than legitimate political positions.

In Rajasthan's solar districts, for example, state agencies describe pastoral lands as 'barren' or 'wasteland', implying that converting them into solar enclosures is an environmental gain rather than an ecological transformation. In Gujarat's coastal regions, wind turbines are celebrated as symbols of clean energy, with little acknowledgement that their foundations often sit on common grazing lands on which pastoralist women depend for daily subsistence. The power of these narratives lies in their ability to convert a political process (who loses land, who gains access, who bears risk) into a technocratic story of efficiency, climate responsibility, and national pride.

The second mechanism is bureaucratic streamlining, where rules designed to protect land rights or ecological systems are weakened, bypassed, or narrowly interpreted. The institutional choreography behind many major projects follows a similar script of accelerated environmental clearances, fragmented public hearings, hurried impact assessments, and rapid handovers of land to state-backed corporations or public–private partnerships (PPPs). This is not only about the weakening of regulatory institutions but about the reorientation of bureaucracy itself. Agencies tasked with environmental oversight frequently see their role as facilitating investment rather than scrutinising it. Officials may conduct a single-season ecological survey where a multi-year baseline is required, or schedule public consultations at short notice, often in languages that affected communities do not speak.

The third mechanism is financial de-risking, the use of public resources to insulate private actors from the political and economic uncertainties of land acquisition. In coal, renewables, ports, or logistics corridors, concessional land leases, guaranteed offtake agreements[52], viability-gap funding[53], and preferential access to credit are the norms. These arrangements transfer risk away from investors, who may not have long-term stakes in local ecologies, and onto communities who face displacement, livelihood loss, or environmental degradation. In the renewable energy sector, de-risking takes the form of state-backed guarantees that allow corporations to secure vast tracts of land with limited up-front costs. Public utilities are required to purchase the power generated, while residents bear the consequences of land conversion. In industrial corridors, the creation of special-purpose vehicles allows state governments to take on debt or legal liability on behalf of private partners. From the perspective of affected communities, financial de-risking often looks like financial externalisation – imposing the financial costs on them. While corporations receive protection from risk, those who depend on the land lose their buffers against drought, climate variability, or market volatility.

The fourth mechanism is security framing, where land and environmental conflicts are recast as threats to national security, territorial integrity, or public order. This framing is not uniform across India. It varies by region and project type. But when invoked, it reshapes the legal environment. In border states, hydro and road projects are justified as military necessities; in coastal zones, ports and container terminals are cast as strategic assets; in forested regions, protests are sometimes linked rhetorically to insurgency or 'anti-national' activity. This security lens raises the threshold for democratic scrutiny whereby courts adopt deferential postures, police treat dissent as potential disorder, and bureaucrats frame approvals as patriotic acts. Security framing does not always involve explicit militarisation. Sometimes it takes subtler forms, such as the use of surveillance technologies in conservation zones or the sealing of judicial inquiries.

These mechanisms – discursive normalisation, procedural compression, financial de-risking, and security framing – are present in many developmental regimes. What distinguishes far-right authoritarian extractivism is how these mechanisms are welded to an identity politics that restructures both targets and remedies. First, the discursive framing does more than justify speed or efficiency; it casts opposition as a form of cultural betrayal, which raises the political cost of dissent and narrows routes for solidarity. Second, administrative and legal instruments are selectively deployed so that dispossession reproduces patterns of social exclusion (targeting communities coded as minority, marginal, or 'outsider') rather than being neutral redistributive failures. Third, non-state actors and corporate allies are incorporated into governance ecosystems in ways that create juridical enclaves and extra-legal pressure – from vigilante intimidation to juridical sealing of inquiry reports – making institutional remedies less effective. In consequence, far-right authoritarian extractivism reorders the stakes of land politics by making territorial transformation part of a project that also recasts belonging, loyalty, and citizenship.

Case Studies: Great Nicobar and Vantara

The cases of Great Nicobar and Vantara show how authoritarian extractivism takes shape. One is a state-led megaproject justified through national security while the other is a corporate-run conservation estate justified through ecological care.

The 'Holistic Development of Great Nicobar' plan is an enormous transhipment port in Galathea Bay, an international airport, a new township and energy infrastructure. It is framed as a strategic intervention that would enhance India's maritime presence near the Malacca Strait. Its scale is staggering, with close to a million trees slated for felling; more than 130 square kilometres (km2) of tropical evergreen forest to be transformed; and the island's population projected to increase 40-fold within a generation. On paper, these interventions are packaged as developmental uplift and national security. In practice, they involve the reorganisation of island ecologies and Indigenous territories at a speed that leaves little room for democratic challenge.

The environmental assessments were conducted at an implausible pace with consultants claiming they could study 130 km^2 of dense rainforest in four days, covering terrain that typically requires multi-season fieldwork. Their reports undercounted species, offered superficial descriptions of habitat conditions, and ignored well-established scientific evidence about the island's fragility. Yet none of these shortcomings slowed the clearances. Instead, the state treated the absence of data as an administrative inconvenience rather than a substantive warning. The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) became a procedural hurdle to be crossed, not a deliberative exercise meant to shape decision-making.

At the same time, the project involved the denotification of the Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary, one of the most important nesting grounds for the giant leatherback turtle in the northern Indian Ocean. This decision had already been taken before any credible feasibility assessment was made public. By the time the broader public learned of the denotification, the legal status of the land had been quietly altered. This tactic of administratively redefining ecologically critical areas before proper scrutiny can take place is a recurring move in contemporary Indian land governance. The transformation of land categories precedes the political debate, pre-shaping what counts as 'reasonable' planning.

The consequences for Indigenous communities are profound. The Nicobarese and the Shompen, the latter a Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group, stand to lose ancestral territory, foraging grounds and coastal habitats deeply tied to their cultural life. Their earlier displacement after the 2004 tsunami had already forced them into temporary settlements far from their traditional coastal villages. Their formal withdrawal of consent for the new project, submitted in writing, was set aside. Their territorial rights are acknowledged on paper but rendered irrelevant when they come into conflict with developmental urgency or geopolitical rhetoric.

The most consequential legitimising move has been the project's framing as a national security imperative. Because Great Nicobar sits on a key maritime route, the language of strategic competition especially vis-à-vis China has been deployed to justify sweeping ecological and social interventions. Once the project is framed in this way, the terms of debate shift. Courts and regulatory bodies tend to defer to the executive. Indeed, in 2023, the National Green Tribunal acknowledged that the clearances were flawed but nonetheless refused to intervene, noting the 'larger public interest'. This logic reclassifies environmental and Indigenous concerns as secondary risks in a securitised landscape.

Together, the rushed assessments, administrative reclassification, side-lining of Indigenous consent, and securitised justification constitute a textbook case of authoritarian extractivism. They reveal how a project can be moved through the system because the architecture of governance was reoriented to ensure its inevitability. The Nicobar project also reflects the far-right's civilisational geopolitics, where territorial expansion and maritime presence are narrated as part of Hindu resurgence and national destiny. This civilisational framing converts technical objections into questions of strategic loyalty, diminishing judicial appetite for intervention and strengthening political incentives to prioritise project completion over consent. This rhetorical layer heightens the moral sanction for overriding Indigenous rights.

Vantara, a sprawling private conservation project operated by Reliance Industries in Jamnagar (Gujarat), reveals a very different but equally significant form of exercising power. On the surface, Vantara presents itself as an animal rescue and rehabilitation centre, the largest of its kind in Asia, spanning approximately 12-14 km2. It hosts endangered species, builds veterinary facilities, expands green cover, and uses the language of care and stewardship. Nothing about it looks like extractivism in the conventional sense. Yet the governance surrounding the project shows how corporate-controlled spaces can become sites of enclosure when regulatory systems bend around them.

When two Public Interest Litigations were filed in 2025 alleging the illegal acquisition of animals, violations of wildlife regulations, and opaque import procedures, the Supreme Court took the unusual step of constituting a Special Investigation Team (SIT) led by a former judge. Within weeks, the SIT submitted its report (which was never made public) clearing Vantara of all allegations. The Court not only accepted the report in full but also barred any future litigation on the matter and granted Vantara the legal right to pursue action against journalists or activists who questioned its operations.

This moment is telling because of how institutional power was exercised. The sealing of the report, the pre-emptive closure of future legal avenues, and the implicit threat of defamation action collectively shift Vantara from a conservation site into a juridical enclave, a space insulated from ordinary forms of public accountability. It produces a kind of extractivism without material extraction, one in which the resource being consolidated is not land or minerals but regulatory discretion, legal shielding, and narrative control.

For communities around Jamnagar, the implications are significant. A private corporation now controls vast tracts of land whose governance is effectively removed from democratic oversight. The authority to define what counts as legitimate conservation lies not with public institutions but with the corporation itself, backed by judicial imprimatur. This mirrors, in a different register, the process by which extractive companies in other parts of the world acquire de facto sovereign powers over territory. Vantara is not a mine, but it is a form of spatial control legitimised by ecological virtue. It reveals how conservation can become a political technology of enclosure. Vantara illustrates another far-right dynamic. The deep entanglement of corporate conglomerates with majoritarian political power, producing legally insulated corporate territories that function as extensions of a political-economic bloc aligned with the ruling party.

Conclusion

What marks this moment is the convergence of multiple justificatory languages – security, efficiency, virtue, care – into a single mode of governance that both accelerates territorial transformation and narrows democratic contestation. What follows from this is not a call for a single grand alternative but for recognising that struggles over land and energy are now central to the defence of democratic life itself. Recognising the far-right inflection matters because it alters the terrain of defence: remedies that rely solely on procedural or technocratic fixes will be insufficient if extractivism is embedded in an identity-based project that delegitimises opponents as enemies of the nation.

India's experience matters beyond its borders because the tools of authoritarian extractivism – legal reclassification of land, procedural compression, investor de-risking, securitised narratives, and the juridical insulation of corporate projects – are portable. The long institutional history of the RSS has produced cadres, discourses and organisational practices that are resonant with other far-right movements; the BJP's governmental reach, India's role in global supply chains, and the international networks of conglomerates and diasporic actors mean that methods of governance developed in India (tactical use of courts, strategic securitisation, public–private special purpose vehicles, and conservation-branded enclosures) can be observed, adapted, and normalised elsewhere.

Moreover, India's prominence in global climate, infrastructure and development finance creates two linked risks and opportunities. The risk is that the language of 'green growth', climate urgency, and strategic infrastructure can be used elsewhere to justify rapid territorial transformation while bypassing safeguards – effectively exporting an extractivist playbook under the guise of transition or security. The opportunity is that this visibility also enables international scrutiny and transnational solidarity: funders, multilateral institutions, researchers, and civil society can identify the governance patterns in time, conditional finance, and support alternative ways of decision-making– community-rooted transitions, robust implementation of free and prior informed consent, and accountability mechanisms – that contest the global diffusion of authoritarian extractivism.

Across India, communities have shown that extractive inevitability is never total – from the halting of bauxite mining in Niyamgiri to local expressions of resistance that slow or reshape projects on the ground. These moments remind us that authority is never secured only from above; it is also contested in everyday negotiations over territory, rights, and survival. Authoritarian extractivism endures by appearing natural, necessary, and uncontestable. Naming it makes its operations visible. Challenging it requires insisting that development can serve people and ecologies rather than subordinating both to speed, security, and spectacle.

BIO

Rohith Jyothish is an Assistant Professor at the Jindal School of International Affairs. He has research interests in India's federal political economy, technology & labour process, welfare regimes and political ecology.

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FASCIST BY DESIGN: Italy's Lessons for Neoliberal Democracies

Irene Crestanello

Technocratic neoliberalism made fascist protections of capital interests in Italy redundant. However its undercurrents persisted in state institutions and in racist formulations of identity that are now being used to police migration, criminalise protest, and systematically erode social rights.

The word fascism has lost much of its meaning. It still carries the stench of twentieth-century-style dictatorships, so accusing contemporary leaders like Giorgia Meloni, Donald Trump, Viktor Orbán, Narendra Modi or Javier Milei of being fascists is often not taken seriously. Yet these are all leaders of countries where democracy is being eroded and coercion is increasingly presented as order. If we are even a little worried about the future of our democracies, it is worth asking what we are facing, and remaining open to the idea that just because it does not look like the fascism of the past, it does not mean it is not fascism.

Italy offers a crucial vantage point for this question. It was both the birthplace of fascism and the laboratory for its reinvention. Beyond Mussolini's dictatorship, the far-right resurfaced twice: during the *anni di piombo* (literally 'years of lead', 1969–1982) and again over the past decade. Each revival reveals how fascism's instruments of violence adapt to political and economic transformations.

After her election in 2022, many were quick to offer reassurance that there was little to worry about Italy's new prime minister, Giorgia Meloni. Though head of a post-fascist party, *Fratelli d'Italia* (Brothers of Italy) with direct lineage to Mussolini's National Fascist Party, she has been portrayed as a conventional conservative with a liberal foreign policy, often compared to Margaret Thatcher.

Three years into her government, however, attacks on the judiciary and the press, growing restrictions on civic space, and the systematic use of legislation by decree to avoid parliamentary scrutiny all point to an illiberal turn. The government has repeatedly accused magistrates of politically motivated interference,[54] seeking to delegitimise investigations and court rulings that contradict government policy. Journalists have been targeted through public intimidation,[55] as well as attempts to discredit critical reporting and mounting pressure on public broadcasters. At the same time, civil society organisations (CSOs) have reported a narrowing of civic space, with new administrative obstacles, threats of funding cuts and increasing hostility towards non-governmental organisations (NGOs) working on migration, rights or social justice.[56] Politicians have intensified efforts to criminalise activism and dissent, targeting NGOs, journalists, minorities, and protesters. This trend has been reinforced by the government's extensive reliance on emergency decrees,[57] which allow legislation to be passed without open parliamentary debate. In parallel, the government has used defamation laws to intimidate intellectuals, university professors and journalists,[58] deterring them from criticising it.

The state broadcaster, RAI, has also come under growing government influence. Journalists have gone on strike, denouncing what they describe as 'suffocating control',[59] and increasing censorship. The most emblematic case was the cancellation of author Antonio Scurati's televised monologue on 25 April 2024,[60] Italy's Liberation Day, which commemorates the end of fascism. Scurati's text criticised the persistence of fascist nostalgia in Italian politics, and its last-minute removal was widely read as political interference.

The 2025 Security Law is another alarming example. Passed as an emergency decree to bypass parliament, it restricts protest and public assembly through vague and arbitrary wording, granting police excessive discretion in defining threats to public order.[61] The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the Council of Europe warned that the legislation risks undermining the rule of law and disproportionately targets migrants, racial minorities, and prisoners.[62] Equally concerning are the discussions surrounding another constitutional reform to grant more power to the Prime Minister at the expense of parliament.[63] This weakening of checks on executive power, which the scholar Nancy Bermeo calls 'executive aggrandisement' lies at the core of Italy's current erosion of democracy.[64]

To grasp the essence of Italy's current government, it is useful to recall the concept of post-fascism, which Enzo Traverso defined as follows:

> Chronologically, this right-wing constellation comes after classical fascism and belongs to a different historical context; politically, it cannot be defined without being compared to classical fascism, which remains a foundational experience. On the one hand, it is no longer fascism; on the other, it is not completely different.[65]

Meloni's Italy exemplifies this tension. She insists that the Italian right 'has consigned fascism to history for decades now', yet her party maintains networks preserving its ideological legacy.[66] The youth wing of *Fratelli d'Italia*, *Gioventù Nazionale*, is a window into this ecosystem. A journalistic investigation documented members performing fascist salutes, chanting fascist and Nazi slogans, and admitting that they deliberately self-censored when speaking to the press to appear more moderate. Off-camera, militants openly identified as fascists and racists, one even boasting family ties to those behind the neofascist bombing of Bologna Station in 1980, which killed 85 and injured over 200.[67]

These circles extend into a dense network of cultural and financial organisations that sustain Italy's far-right. On social media is easy to see how *Gioventù Nazionale* and its student branch, *Azione Studentesca*, maintain ties with groups like *CasaPound*, an Italian neofascist accelerationist movement and militant organisation, as well as *Passaggio al Bosco*, a publishing house promoting fascist and neofascist literature and writers. For book promotion, *Passaggio al Bosco* has collaborated with the *Fondazione Alleanza Nazionale*, which many consider to be *Fratelli d'Italia*'s financial arm, where Arianna Meloni, the Prime Minister's sister, sits on the board. *Fondazione Alleanza Nazionale* has in turn financed far-right associations such as *Forza Nuova*.[68] *FN* and its leader, the convicted criminal and militant Roberto Fiore, remain connected to the *Alliance for Peace and Freedom*, a pan-European platform linking neofascist movements across the continent.

Accompanying this structure has been a growing discourse of intolerance centred on supposed threats to Western and Italian culture. The Deputy Prime Minister, Matteo Salvini, for instance, routinely posts alarmist messages about migrants and Islam. Similar tactics include Giorgia Meloni's false claim that migrant arrivals have driven an increase in rapes, and the warnings by Francesco Lollobrigida, Minister of Agriculture, about so-called ethnic replacement.[69] This rhetoric has been reinforced by efforts to rewrite the history of the resistance to fascism, which has erroneously been labeled as purely communist. It has reached the point where both Meloni and the President of the Senate, Ignazio La Russa, have promoted a false account of a Nazi reprisal during World War II in order to shift blame onto the antifascist resistance and therefore onto communists.[70]

The combination of such political narratives with legislations aimed at targeting groups perceived as threats to a supposed homogenous, family-based and Christian Italian identity, results in the legitimisation of an insidious form of authoritarianism in which repression is legalised and opposition delegitimised.

These developments echo what Johan Galtung called *cultural violence,* which involves 'those aspects of culture, the symbolic sphere of our existence [...] that can be used to justify or legitimise direct or structural violence'.[71] *Structural violence* being violence 'built into the structure and [showing up] as unequal power'.[72]

This cultural and structural violence is what allows a far-right project to thrive within democratic institutions, and to erode them from within. Taking two foundational characteristics of fascism, political violence and anticommunism, and following how they evolved through the genealogy of Italy's far-right, we can also see how democracy itself has changed. As capitalist democracies became increasingly neoliberal by incorporating the interests of capital within their own institutional structures, new forms of fascism and its violence have adapted in response. With countries becoming more technocratic, and increasingly shaped by market imperatives, fascism no longer needed to be fully totalitarian – and for now, no longer fully authoritarian. Violence is becoming increasingly embedded in the state rather than paramilitary, absolving fascist movements of such responsibility. Anticommunism, on the other hand, has survived as a way of stigmatising any challenge to the economic order, often accompanied by perceived threats to a constructed national identity, which have been instrumentalised to garner support for a political agenda aimed at the preservation of a homogeneous society.

Through Italy's history, we can observe this transformation at work: from *squadrismo* in the 1920s, to the strategy of tension in the 1970s, to the neoliberalism of recent decades. Each stage reveals a shift in how fascism defends capital and legitimises violence within democracy. Understanding this lineage allows us to see not only what fascism has become in Italy, but also how the Italian and other democracies have allowed themselves to develop.

A brief history of the rise of fascism and neofascism in Italy

Squadrismo

Benito Mussolini's seizure of power in 1922 was not a revolution, but the culmination of deliberate political choices by conservatives and liberals seeking to quell the social unrest of 1919–1920, known as *biennio rosso* (the red biennium).

Post-war Italy faced one of capitalism's gravest crises. The Italian economist Clara Mattei writes that an anti-capitalist awakening was possible given the state interventionism that Italy employed like the other warring nations to confront the enormities of the war-production efforts. Entire sectors were collectivised as the government employed more workers and regulated the cost and supply of labour, showing that wage relations were political choices rather than natural economic equilibrium.[73] Unions became more powerful, and workers realised that they had the leverage to demand more social rights, supported by the work of leftist intellectuals like Antonio Gramsci and Palmiro Togliatti.

With inflation skyrocketing, an unprecedented social upheaval swept the country. The revolutionary movement culminated in 1920, concentrated in northern Italy but expanding across the whole

national territory. In this context where landowners, industrialists and centre-right politicians feared the subversion of society and erosion of national values, Benito Mussolini, a failed politician, gave them a tool to protect their interests: *squadrismo*.

Squadrismo was the movement of fascist action squads targeting socialists, communists, and revolutionaries. Through these squads, fascism took root as a violent counter-revolutionary force wherever elites perceived the state to be unable to protect property and hierarchy. It also answered a sense of national victimhood and decline that followed World War I. Decline was blamed on individualistic liberalism, falling birth-rates, class conflict, and foreign influences. News outlets like *The Economist* and *Il Sole* mirrored elite sentiment, portraying fascists as patriots who had ended the Bolshevik threat by 'abandoning legal ways' to save the nation.[74] The new ways involved beatings, kidnappings, murders and the forced administration of castor oil, especially in socialist towns, while state authorities turned a blind eye.

Within a short time, *squadrismo* became entrenched in local politics, and Mussolini's popularity among elites soared. In 1921, the liberal Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti called elections and put forward a conservative alliance known as *Blocco Nazionale*, a right-wing coalition including Mussolini's new *Fasci di Combattimento*. The socialist front held, however, and *Blocco Nazionale* did not win, but Mussolini became the third most voted parliamentarian and gained 35 seats. Successive government crises in 1921 and 1922 allowed him to consolidate power within parliament.

Mussolini used fear of socialism, conservative compliance, state authorities' acquiescence, and threat of violence to finally seize power. On 28 October 1922, tens of thousands of fascist Blackshirts, *Camicie Nere,* were camped outside Rome – poorly equipped and in dire conditions – a bluff that could have been easily exposed by the royal garrisons defending the city. Yet the monarch, Victor Emmanuel III, did not sign the martial law decree and offered the position of prime minister to Mussolini. On official royal invitation, Mussolini arrived in Rome on 30 October. The following day, tens of thousands of Blackshirts were allowed in the city for a royal salute. The 'vigorous fascist revolution' (*la gagliarda rivoluzione fascista*) immortalised in memory was the mythification of this bluff.

Benito Mussolini with the Blackshirt leaders that 'led' the March on Rome, taken on October 24, 1922.

Once in power, Mussolini destroyed the very liberal democracy that gave him the tools and expedients to neutralise socialist unrest. Every time they faced a political choice, elites chose the anti-socialist, counter-revolutionary one, paving Mussolini's road to power by accepting compromise after compromise in an attempt to save and restore the country's capital and order through the means of fascist *squadrismo.* It was not the strength of the Blackshirts but the cowardice of the monarchy and conservatives' refusal to risk their own force that secured power for Mussolini. In November 1922, the Italian stock market soared: capitalism had been saved.

This first iteration of far-right political violence shows how the defence of capitalism and the fear of social upheaval led elites to tolerate and legitimise violence as an instrument of order. Here, political violence was not just the use of force but a deliberate political strategy, framed as necessary to preserve both capitalist order and national identity. What began as extra-legal violence by *squadristi* was then absorbed into the state itself, giving life to the fascist dictatorship under *Il Duce*.

This essay will not narrate the horrors of this period. After 20 years, Italy was freed from Nazi-Fascism by the resistance and the Allies. Mussolini was killed by partisans in 1945 as he was fleeing to Switzerland. He was hung upside down in Milan's Piazzale Loreto.

Strategy of tension

The history of neofascist terrorism in Italy during the *anni di piombo* (1969–1982) is a history of rogue secret services, state complicity, cover-ups, and foreign interference. The expression was borrowed from Margarethe von Trotta's film *Die bleierne Zeit*, which won the Golden Lion at the 38th Venice International Film Festival in 1978.

Marked by political violence from both far-right and far-left actors, the period saw the latter, such as *Brigate Rosse*, *Prima Linea*, and *Nuclei Armati Proletari*, aiming their attack towards the heart of the state by targeting authorities, officials, and trade unionists. Neofascist terrorism, in contrast, operated covertly as part of a strategy of tension, defined as the use of political violence to instill fear among the population and thereby justify an authoritarian turn.

This period cannot be separated from the incomplete process of *defascistisation* after 1945. The 1946 Togliatti amnesty ensured that large parts of the civil service, judiciary, police and military remained staffed by former fascists, allowing fascist culture and networks to persist within the state apparatus.[75] And although the Constitution banned the re-organisation of the Fascist Party, former fascist officials quickly returned to politics and public life. For example, Giorgio Almirante, former Head of Cabinet in the Nazi-fascist *Repubblica di Salò* and writer for *La Difesa della Razza*, founded the *Movimento Sociale Italiano* (MSI) party to preserve fascism's political legacy. Licio Gelli, a former liaison between fascist authorities and Nazi Germany, became Venerable Master of the clandestine far-right Masonic lodge, *Propaganda Due* (P2), which had an important role in the years of lead.

Giorgio Almirante, founder of MSI © La Repubblica

During the Cold War, Italy became a geopolitical frontline. The presence of the largest communist party in Western Europe, combined with renewed labour mobilisation in 1968, alarmed conservative forces and Western allies. Just as in the 1920s, it was when the capitalist hierarchy appeared fragile that far-right violence re-emerged. In this context, this was closely rooted in MSI and its offshoots, *Ordine Nuovo*[76] and *Avanguardia Nazionale*. Key figures moved between these organisations, maintaining both political and operational continuity.[77]

The Piazza Fontana bombing in Milan, which killed 17 people and injured 88, is the event that marked the beginning of the *anni di piombo* and the so-called massacre phase of the strategy of tension. Initial investigations blamed anarchists, following a 'red trail'. Later inquiries uncovered a 'black trail', exposing the role of neofascist groups and deliberate efforts to shift responsibility onto the left. The Istituto Treccani describes the massacre as an act of extremist groups, notably Ordine Nuovo, acting alongside rogue sectors of the Italian security apparatus in response to the powerful cycle of social struggles in 1968 and 1969, and to the electoral rise of the Italian Communist Party (PCI).[78]

The involvement of rogue sectors of the state during this period proved to be on a much larger scale and of a more systematic nature. For example, the judgments in the Piazza della Loggia bombing in Brescia exposed that gendarmerie officials diverted the investigations of the attacks.[79] Moreover, reports indicated the strategic involvement of the CIA in instigating[80] and supporting[81] these waves of right-wing terrorism in Italy during the 1970s. This support probably came in connection with a broader European, NATO-linked 'stay behind' operation which in Italy, under the code name Gladio, took the form of a covert paramilitary structure.[82]

Judicial and parliamentary inquiries revealed links between neofascist militants, sectors of the secret services, national gendarmerie units and the far-right Masonic lodge P2 to sustain the strategy of tension.[83] These relationships involved systematic obstruction through *depistaggi* (cover-ups and false leads) that diverted investigations. Members of P2 also participated in the failed *Golpe Borghese* coup attempt of 1970.

Yet this strategy ultimately failed, not because Italian society was immune to authoritarianism, but because the dominant political and economic elites did not require an overt authoritarian restructuring of the state to protect the capital order, as neoliberalism took hold of Italy in the 1970s and 1980s. As Nicos Poulantzas argued, the capitalist state proved capable of containing social unrest through what he called authoritarian statism: intensified state control combined with the hollowing out of democracy.[84]

From the Years of Lead to Authoritarian Statism

By the end of the *anni di piombo*, the far-right had to recontextualise itself in a world where socialist revolution had failed, the Soviet Union was collapsing, and capitalism was no longer under threat.

With the political crisis of the early 1990s and the dissolution of the mainstream parties, the MSI leader Gianfranco Fini rebranded the party as *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN) while rhetorically embracing the constitution and anti-fascism. In 1994, AN entered government through an alliance with the business tycoon and P2 member Silvio Berlusconi's *Forza Italia*. In 2019 Berlusconi himself stated that *Forza Italia* had 'legitimised and constitutionalised the Fascists' back in 1994.[85] This eventually led to the rise of Giorgia Meloni, who began in the MSI and later joined *Alleanza Nazionale*.

It is here that Nicos Poulantzas' concept of authoritarian statism becomes crucial for understanding Italy's trajectory. Writing in the late 1970s, Poulantzas argued that neoliberalism does not diminish the state but re-organises it, producing 'an intensification of state control over every sphere of socio-economic life, combined with a decline in democratic institutions and popular freedoms.' The state becomes stronger and more centralised, as democratic participation and social protections are hollowed out.[86]

As neoliberalism took hold in the 1980s, key levers of democracy were outsourced to technocratic institutions. The former Minister of the Economy Guido Carli wrote:

> The European Union implies ... the abandonment of the mixed economy, the abandonment of economic planning, the redefinition of the modalities of composition of public expenditure, the restriction of the powers of parliamentary assemblies in favor of government . . . the repudiation of the concept of free social provisions (and the subsequent reform of healthcare and social security systems) ... the reduction of the presence of the state in the financial and industrial systems ...the abandonment of price controls and tariffs.[87]

This meant that the terrain of left-wing struggle (economic planning, redistribution, social rights) had gradually moved beyond democratic reach. The revolutionary left that had fuelled the *biennio rosso* and 1968 protests could no longer grasp the system it opposed. And while Berlusconi always maintained an almost comical stance against communism, with slogans like 'you will always be poor communists' (*sarete sempre dei poveri comunisti*), he embodied exactly this shift. As Enzo Traverso observes, Berlusconi's governments did not revive classical fascism, but they 'introduced a cultural and political environment in which fascist genealogies could reappear without scandal'.[88] Under Berlusconi, media concentration, personalised executive power, and the demonisation of critics as communists reshaped the political field. The police brutality and human rights violations that surrounded the 2001 G8 in Genoa, where protesters were beaten, tortured and forced to chant fascist slogans,[89] were a clear demonstration of authoritarian statism in practice – where coercion was no longer presented as dictatorship, but as the defence of public order within a neoliberal democracy that now safeguarded the social and capital hierarchy within its own state structure.

Post-fascism or pre-fascism?

From Berlusconi onwards, fascism's political legacy in Italy has been steadily normalised. The far-right no longer needed to overthrow the liberal order; it could operate within it. Neoliberal restructuring had already eroded the capacity of democratic institutions to represent popular interests. Power shifted from parliaments to executives, citizens to markets, politics to technocracy. Within this landscape, the old fascist logic of hierarchy, nationalism and exclusion could comfortably reassert itself.

Giorgia Meloni's rise therefore must be understood as the culmination of this process rather than its end. Similar to *Fasci di Combattimento,* and therefore the National Fascist Party itself, *Fratelli d'Italia* was portrayed as a rupture from mainstream parties but emerged in continuity with their neoliberal policies. With this inheritance and the persistence of 'red phobia' in Italian public life, when the so-called migrant crisis began in 2013 and peaked in 2015, it provided fertile ground for parties like *Fratelli d'Italia* and Matteo Salvini's *Lega,* which rode the wave of the discontent caused by the 2008 financial crisis and redirected it against migrants, Roma people, Muslims, LGBTQ+ citizens, and even cultural outsiders. Exclusion of social heterogeneity is now becoming law, for example with the Security Bill punishing peaceful protesters with sentences of up to 20 years or with provisions

against ‘gatherings’ aiming at raves and, arbitrarily, any invasion of terrains and buildings deemed dangerous to the public order.[90] Other laws criminalise surrogate parenthood performed abroad, with a major impact on LGBTQ+ families.[91] These are clear expressions of the interplay between what Galtung defined as cultural and structural violence, and how they affect real lives.

Logos of Movimento Sociale Italiano and Fratelli d’Italia

Meloni’s leadership parallels other neoliberal democracies. Italy’s long fascist lineage helps us identify the substance of fascism, namely anticommunism and the defence of capital, and recognise how these traits adapt to neoliberal conditions. This continuity makes Italy an illustration of a wider pattern. Even in countries with no fascist past, democracies are turning towards illiberal forms of (national) protection. The essence remains the safeguarding of capital and a homogeneous cultural identity against perceived threats.

This form of post-fascism has been particularly subtle. Elections continue, but their meaning narrows as the space for contestation shrinks. Violence persists, not as open terror but as structure, in the policing of migration, the criminalisation of protest, the systematic erosion of social rights. The shift from physical to structural violence, from paramilitary to bureaucratic control, marks the adaptation of fascism to neoliberalism, whereby the state has absorbed the responsibility of protecting capitalism in a way that has allowed post-fascism to *remain* post-fascist.

For now.

Openly illiberal and violent behaviours are increasingly normalised. The assault on the US Capitol on 6 January 2021 and Jair Bolsonaro’s attempted coup in Brazil a year later should be understood not as anomalies but as warnings. As these politics spread across democracies, far-right movements grow emboldened to pursue violent projects that are not condemned by international allies who share their worldview.

But if neoliberal democracy had been sufficient to preserve the capitalist status quo, it would not explain why the system continues to harden under Meloni, Trump, Modi, Orbán and Milei alike.

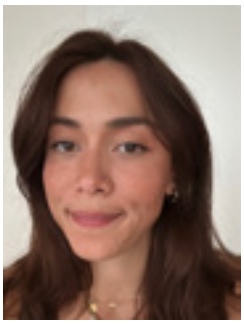
In addressing authoritarian statism, Nicos Poulantzas affirmed that in advanced liberal democracies it was likely to take the form of selective internationalism, intensified technocracy, and police violence. In other contexts, particularly in countries dependent on larger imperialist powers, it could produce exceptional forms such as fascism or military dictatorship, like in Latin America in the 1960s–1970s. What remains is the question of whether the subtler form can evolve into the other.

My contention is that the logic Poulantzas described now operates inside advanced democracies through a different mechanism. Dependency no longer runs only along an imperialist chain of states but also through a transnational capitalist class whose mobility, resources and influence are rendering nation states increasingly dependent. What this means is that while at the dawn of neoliberalism only the countries at the bottom of the imperialist chain were particularly susceptible to overtly authoritarian regimes, now this risk has spread across countries at the top of the imperialist chain because they have lost their independence to financial markets and the transnational capitalist class, which now controls the levers of global policy-making.[92] In this way, the increasing incidence and intensity of right-wing governance projects in neoliberal democracies such as Italy can be seen as a symptom of this change.

Just as the rise of fascism in the twentieth century was facilitated by the dependency of states on foreign loans, markets, and external economic constraints, today many of the countries that once constituted the neoliberal and imperial core find themselves in a comparable position of dependence. Their vulnerability no longer lies primarily in inter-state hierarchies, but in their subordination to a transnational capital. This renewed dependency endangers once again the democratic substance of political life in Italy and other neoliberal democracies, creating the conditions in which authoritarian practices can resurface once again.

BIO

Irene Crestanello holds a BA in International Affairs from John Cabot University (2021) and an MA in International Conflict and Security from the University of Kent (2023). In 2024, she participated in PRIO's Summer School in Peace Research. She has experience in research and advocacy from NGO and private sector and she is actively seeking to return to the field of conflict and democracy studies and plans to pursue a PhD.



MIRROR AND MISMATCH: China and the global politics of the far-right

Interview with Chenchen Zhang

The far-right label is not easily applied in China, but nevertheless there is a rising tide of xenophobia, militaristic nationalism, racism, anti-feminism, and social conservatism in Chinese online discourse and sometimes within the state. The global fight against fascism requires movements worldwide to connect with grassroots activists within China and among the diaspora pushing for liberatory futures.

Is there a far right in China? What are its characteristics? How does it coincide with or differ from the far right elsewhere?

It can be tricky to talk about 'left' and 'right' as ideological labels in China because of the political and moral baggage associated with them. As the ruling party is nominally 'communist' and has historically referred to dissidents as 'rightists' (*youpai* 右派), the public tends to use 'left' and 'right' as a shorthand for describing attitudes towards the regime: 'left' as supporting the establishment and 'right' as being against it, such as the liberal intellectuals (*ziyoupai* 自由派) advocating constitutionalism and liberal democracy.

Members of the Chinese intelligentsia and the wider online public, however, increasingly recognise that both pro-regime and anti-regime camps are themselves divided into left and right orientations. The debate among intellectuals about Trump and Trumpism, broadly described as *ziyoupai*, in particular revealed the schism between left-leaning and right-leaning liberals. This has led some observers to identify a far-right (*jiyou* 极右) current within Chinese dissidence, characterised by racism, libertarianism and the rejection of progressive social movements.[93]

Academic discussions usually describe xenophobia, militaristic nationalism, Islamophobia, racism, anti-feminism, and social conservatism as right-wing. However, given the baggage of 'left' and 'right' in Chinese political culture, supporters of the regime rarely consider themselves to be 'right-wing', even if their views are overtly racist, misogynistic, chauvinist, and xenophobic. Anti-Americanism is typically considered to be on the 'left' given the anti-imperialist association. For example, known for his hawkish stance towards the US and Japan, Ai Yuejie, formerly a professor of military thought, is revered among some online communities self-identifying as 'far left' (*jizuo* 极左) or 'Maoist left (*maozuo* 毛左). One of his best-known quotes, which his fans cite as a motto, encapsulates the principle of 'might makes right': 'Dignity lies only at the tip of the sword; truth exists only within the range of artillery'. This means that those who are labelled as 'far left' in popular culture may in fact espouse militaristic, ultranationalist, and authoritarian ideologies more commonly associated with the right.

Interestingly, while conservative Chinese nationalists are unlikely to self-identify as right-wing, many are now comfortable with describing themselves as 'conservative'. In other words, 'progressive' and 'conservative' are generally used in line with international conventions.

So, after this lengthy preface, yes, there are far-right discourses and ideological currents in China, both among nationalists and dissidents, even though supporters of the regime may consider themselves to be leftists. Like the far right elsewhere, these coalesce around racial nationalism and the backlash against social-justice movements. For conservative nationalists, feminism, LGBTQ movements, labour movements, and other forms of human rights activism are also de-legitimatised as instruments of 'Western imperialism', exemplifying the appropriation of the anti-imperialist language. This is

not limited to China, but also seen in other countries in the Global South, and indeed in the Global North as well.[94] In my forthcoming book, I highlight the transversal convergence across not only conventional geopolitical, but also ideological, boundaries in the post-liberal conjuncture, where we often see ideological cross-fertilisation in any number of ways.[95]

Reactionary politics everywhere do not have a coherent agenda. They may be rejecting similar things (whether immigrants or 'wokeism') but with very different proposals. Compared to the traditionalists or libertarians who have a stronger influence in the US, Chinese conservative and authoritarian techno-nationalist discourse is less concerned with safeguarding 'traditional values' than with upholding techno-scientific reason against the chaos and moral decay attributed to 'postmodernism', while remaining favourable towards globalisation and state capitalism. If the Silicon Valley techno-libertarianism is about 'the government should do nothing to hinder technological progress',[96] then for the Chinese techno-authoritarians, the government should do everything to pursue and guide technological progress. They share a common aversion to democratic processes and progressive movements, along with various forms of racism and misogyny. However, both official and popular nationalisms in China are rooted in postcolonial developmentalism, where political sovereignty is most important, and the ethics of cultivating a neoliberal and entrepreneurial self is tied to the project of national development.

How about the Chinese state? And how is this influenced by what's happening elsewhere in the world?

This is another reason for why it is difficult to talk about China in discussions of the far right. The Chinese state presents itself as anti-imperialist and, of course, socialist. The fact that there are no elections and no political movements allowed outside the official apparatus also contributes to China's marginalisation in far-right studies, which tend to prioritise electoral politics. In a wonderful article on the global politics of the far right, Anievas and Saull talk about a set of 'common enabling conditions' that 'laterally connect Modi's India and Bolsonaro's Brazil with the "UKIPisation" of Britain and 'Trumpification' of America insofar as the neoliberal-driven de-industrialisation of the "advanced" capitalist powers was internationally entwined with the large-scale processes of "accumulation by dispossession" most dramatically experienced by such "late" state-led industrialisers like the BRIC states and, most notably, China'.[97] The article and the special issue it introduces, however, engage little with China itself beyond how its portrayal as a threat enable far-right politics in the US. Unlike Modi-ism or Erdoğan-ism, the one-party system and the socialist state probably make the usual frameworks and languages of analysis inadequate or a poor fit when it comes to China's relationship with the global politics of the far right.

We can indeed situate Xiism within broader contestations of the 'liberal international order' from other emerging powers such as India and Türkiye.[98] Rather than being an external challenger, China has been integral to both the relatively stable hegemony of global neoliberalism in the 1990s and 2000s, and to the intensification of the post-liberal contestations we now witness. This represents a partial and selective rejection of some aspects of the liberal international order, such as the normative hierarchy that tends to stigmatise or impose 'symbolic disempowerment' on nations or subjects considered illiberal,[99] which co-exists with embracing other aspects, such as globalisation, multilateralism, and the United Nations (UN) system. In contrast to the anti-globalism of the Western far right, Kumral notes that for emerging powers, neoliberal globalisation continues to be seen as 'opportunities for upward mobility for national economies in international stratification'.[100] She argues that Modi and Erdoğan synthesise neoliberalism with developmentalism, offering 'selective

redistributionist policies that target the poorest sections', providing the rising middle class with a 'master development narrative of a rising Turkey/India in a period of global hegemonic transformation' and a re-imagining of past empires.[101] Xiism runs parallel to these projects in many aspects, being embedded in the 'common enabling conditions' mentioned earlier, including the shifting economic power relations and capitalism's 'spatial fix' of manufacturing jobs, which has contributed to different attitudes towards globalisation in the North and the South. As Eli Friedman puts it, if the social 'dissolution wrought by neoliberal capitalism has revitalized fascism in the West, it has been similarly important in the rise of ethnonationalist dictator in China'.[102]

Intersecting with these economic processes is postcolonial identity politics, which often takes the form of civilisational discourses that assert one's identity and cultural particularities against 'Western hegemony' or 'cultural imperialism'. This is not particularly new. For example, the Guomindang's (the Nationalist Party) conservative revolution in the 1930s was doing very much the same: justifying authoritarianism and social conservatism through claims about cultural authenticity and resistance to Western imperialism.[103] However, in contemporary China and shaped by the post-Cold War international order, we also see arguments about security in addition to those about authenticity. Certain values or movements are framed both as 'not ours' (not Chinese) and as instruments of regime-change attempts threatening national security. Among the cultural elites, conservative intellectuals in China have been influenced by figures such as Samuel Huntington and Carl Schmitt in their articulation of China as a 'civilizational state'. Drawing heavily on Huntington and in an explicitly gendered language, Gan Yang, a prominent conservative philosopher based at Tsinghua University, characterised the earlier pursuit by Türkiye and Russia of 'Westernised' modernisation as 'self-castration', whereby they lose their own racial-civilisational identity.[104] Jiang Shigong, another state-adjacent intellectual and a Schmittian legal theorist, argues that the prevailing discourse of 'integrating with the world' in the 1990s and 2000s means that 'we' have lost 'our civilisational impulse and political will to defend ourselves'.[105] Ironically, again, these prominent intellectuals of conservative civilisationism, such as Gan Yang, Jiang Shigong, and Zhang Weiwei, are known as the 'new left' despite their affinities with European and US conservative thought.

As I have recently argued,[106] civilisational discourse becomes a vehicle for claiming difference internationally and suppressing difference domestically. At the international level, Xi's 'Global Civilisation Initiative' advocates diversity and warns against 'imposing one's values and models onto others'. Domestically, assimilationist ethnic policy is accompanied with the re-centring of *zhonghua minzu* (Chinese nation or race-nation)[107] and *zhonghua wenming* (Chinese civilisation) as key concepts in the country's political discourse. Under the slogan of 'forging a strong communal consciousness of the Chinese nation', assimilationist policies seek to erase and securitise difference, while turning a depolitcised, exoticised version of ethnic difference into resources for tourism and consumerism. These policies scale back a range of preferential policies that ethnic minorities used to enjoy, infringe on cultural and religious rights, and remove minority languages as medium of instruction in formal education.[108] At the same time, we see abundant scenes of minority 'singing and dancing' in domestic and external propaganda as a display of 'diversity' and 'unity', which reduces living religious and cultural traditions to exoticised patriotic performances.[109] With the rise of ecotourism, as Guldana Salimjan argues, the rebranding of Indigenous lands as Han ecotourist destinations to appreciate 'untainted nature' is marked by land dispossession and labour injustice.[110]

What about in terms of social media and internet discourse? Do we see similar threads of xenophobia, misogyny, and reactionary social violence in Chinese social media that we see in other parts of the world?

Absolutely. My previous work has focused extensively on the transnational circulation of far-right narratives and tropes in the digital sphere.[111] A lot of this is misinformation and conspiracy theories about demographic and cultural crises of 'the West'. So, when internet users in China deploy the same imaginaries about 'Western civilisation' being undermined by 'non-white' immigrants and 'woke' ideologies as Western far-right actors, it's about the decline of 'the other', told as a cautionary tale with a sense of geopolitical *Schadenfreude*. The cautionary tale serves to bolster ethnonationalist anxieties and delegitimise domestic social movements in a fashion of "this must never happen in China'. We have seen the rise of grassroots Islamophobic influencers or *muhei* (穆黑), who mobilise both globally, circulating scripts of Islamophobia, and more locally rooted patterns of prejudice.[112]

Many of the anti-immigration narratives are about portraying crises of 'the other', although they sometimes extend to China's own immigration policy (statistically China has one of the lowest shares of foreign-born residents worldwide). The online backlash against the new regulations on foreigners' permanent residency in 2020 provides one such example. Apart from 'racist coverage of African immigrant communities in Guangzhou',[113] the backlash also features themes that reflect certain locally specific grammars of grievance. This includes the longstanding perception that foreigners get special preferential treatment, and the discontent with unequal status among Chinese citizens themselves due to the *hukou* system – which produces an unequal citizenship regime that disadvantages rural migrant workers, who are often excluded from urban social citizenship and welfare provisions or included but on a differential basis.[114] While this institution is unique to China, it is commonly observed in the affective politics of right-wing populism that grievances about inequalities or marginalisation are weaponised and channelled towards hatred against the ethnocultural other. Han supremacist narratives online also frequently frame ethnic minorities in China as undeservingly privileged and Han males as being victimised.[115]

In the more recent backlash against China's newly introduced K-visa, which is intended to attract talent in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM), we also see that blatant racism is entangled with socioeconomic anxieties. Ultranationalist influencers are spreading a wave of misinformation that claims that Indians were already 'studying the visa' and would come to China in large numbers, taking an already shrinking number of graduate jobs. These online posts reproduce racist stereotypes about Indians having 'fake diplomas' or 'lack of hygiene', while also tapping into widespread anxieties about economic slowdown and the lack of job opportunities. On the previous point about ideological fusion, some defenders of the Chinese regime on X (formerly Twitter) use an apparently socialist rhetoric to justify anti-immigration ethnonationalism, claiming that China is a socialist 'ethno-state', and that multiculturalism and immigration are the products of neoliberalism.[116]

Feminism has emerged as one of the most powerful mobilising issues in China's digital sphere. Like reactionary movements elsewhere, the rise of misogyny and anti-feminism is a reaction to the growing influence of feminism and gender-related debates in public discourse. Some online communities known as the Chinese manosphere, and the techno-nationalist discourse I discussed earlier, have a strong misogynist undertone. Furthermore, anti-feminism is often geopoliticised. Feminists are stigmatised by anti-feminist nationalists as agents of 'foreign hostile forces' or as 'connected to Islamists',[117] exemplifying the kind of right-wing intersectionality[118] that fuses different and often contradictory talking points (Islamophobia and anti-feminism) that we also see elsewhere.

An interesting political slur that has gained currency among nationalist influencers in recent years is *zhiren* 殖人, supposedly meaning a colonial or 'mentally colonised' person. Critics of the regime in general, but feminists and queer activists in particular, are often labelled *zhiren.* It is of course a longstanding and widespread phenomenon to discredit social groups who hold dissenting political views by calling them traitors, collaborators, or otherwise 'anti-national'. However, I read the explicit invocation of colonial here as symptomatic of a newly emerging and distinctively *post-liberal* sensibility (different from, say, anti-imperialism in the Maoist era) as the moral authority of the liberal order erodes. Rather than (or in addition to) denouncing perceived external hierarchies, the accusation of coloniality is turned inwards to target the internal other, whose identification with progressive values is recast as colonial subservience and national betrayal.[119]

How does Chinese popular discourse and the official state discourse respond to the demonisation of China by some elements of the right in the West?

Demonisation feeds into victimhood nationalism, which is useful in distracting attention from debates on concrete issues to moralised narratives about injury and humiliation.[120] However, popular or official nationalism does not consider demonisation to be only from elements of the right. Sinophobia from the right tends to more blatant forms of racism, as seen in Trump's rhetoric about 'kung flu' and 'China virus' during the COVID-19 pandemic. This of course invited strong reactions and led to the a 'narrative battle' of blame games with US and China accusing each other of causing the virus.[121] But nationalists equally resent 'demonisation' from the centre and progressive liberals, which is seen as condescending and rooted in a sense of moral superiority. Some might regard this as more despicable than animosity based on straightforward racism or strategic calculation. Indeed, conservative nationalists largely favoured Trump over the Democratic candidate in both the 2016 and 2024 elections.[122] In a global survey conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations after Trump's re-election but *before* he assumed office, more Chinese respondents saw his return a 'good thing' for US citizens, for the world and for China than those who saw it a 'bad thing' or were neutral.[123]

For conservative nationalists, apart from ideological affinities regarding gender and ethnicity, it is believed that since both US parties are anti-China, Trump is at least less interested in 'preaching' liberal values abroad or funding the '*zhiren*' in China (a talking point used by some nationalist influencers during the 2024 US election). Trump's newly released National Security Strategy in fact echoes Chinese techno-nationalist views in this respect: it criticises the liberal universalist agenda of promoting democracy and no longer approaches the US–China rivalry through the framework of democracy versus authoritarianism, but as a matter of strategic and geo-economic calculus.[124] The competition might be ruthless, yet they share the same post-liberal political sensibilities.

Samuel Huntington, a US conservative, and John Mearsheimer, an International Relations (IR) neo-realist, have both been highly influential in shaping Chinese international thought in both intellectual and popular spaces. Convinced that all US actors are 'anti-China' anyway, Chinese nationalists consider strategic competition (realist IR) or 'clashes of civilization' (Huntington) to be more reasonable and honest grounds for hostility than the neoconservative or liberal internationalists' moralised interpretation of world order. Leaving aside the factor of great power rivalry, far-right European leaders are well-regarded in popular and official discourse. Victor Orbán is a clear example, and Georgia Meloni has also been given favourable coverage in both state and social media.

Is there resistance to these trends of reactionary nationalism? What form does it take?

Yes. Resistance comes from a range of different positions: progressive liberals, feminists, queer activists, anticolonial internationalists, dissident Marxists, or dissident Maoists who speak an older form of Maoist language.[125] As I mentioned before, digital feminism has been thriving within China's online public sphere even though the space for offline mobilisation has diminished. Feminist discourses in China are extremely diverse, including currents that are, for example, neoliberal, trans-exclusive, or classist. There is no monolithic picture. However, feminist voices form one of the most distinctive digital counter-publics that offer an alternative to state-sanctioned or grassroots narratives of masculinist nationalism. One of the surprisingly lively spaces is podcasting. Some of the most successful podcasts are led by women who are critical and culturally progressive. Their popularity among younger and well-educated urban women have also brought commercial sponsorship and partnerships.

Despite stringent censorship, the digital ecosystem remains decentralised, allowing the existence of anonymous, informal, and non-institutionalised forms of publication. Yawen Li has, for example, detailed some of the initiatives of anticolonial internationalists in China, who run publications or WeChat accounts focused on colonialism, patriarchy, capitalist exploitation, and resistance across the world.[126] From Ukraine to Palestine, Chinese internationalists refuse to align their expression of solidarity with the geopolitical interests of either China or 'the West'. Jing Wang has written about how Chinese Muslims strategically voice dissent online in the shadow of both censorship and anti-Muslim sentiments.[127] For many ordinary internet users, non-engagement with such racist, misogynist, and ultranationalist messaging is also a form of resistance.

There is also the incredible growth of diaspora Chinese communities engaged in feminist, anti-racist, decolonial, and anti-authoritarian activism, especially after the 'whitepaper movement' of late 2022.[128] These growing spaces of transnational activism draw on feminist ethics of care and solidarity, challenging and critiquing patriarchal power structures and the dualistic geopolitical imaginary of 'authoritarian China' versus the 'free world' that shaped earlier forms of pro-democratic advocacy among the diaspora.[129] In an ongoing project on digital counter-publics and transnational Chinese feminism, my collaborators and I have been working with queer feminist Chinese organisers across Europe, Japan, and North America to understand how they theorise and practise transnational solidarity beyond binaries and rooted in the interconnections of different structures of domination. Chinese diaspora activists have also done extraordinary work in mobilising for Palestine's liberation and against genocide through collectives such as the Palestine Solidarity Action Network (PSAN). Their work provides a transnational analysis of connections between settler-colonial violence in Palestine and Xinjiang, standing against US imperialism without glossing over Chinese authoritarianism and colonialism.

How can we build global alliances against the far right that better integrate Chinese perspectives?

I think it's essential to build global alliances that better integrate Chinese perspectives. The starting point would be listening to and building alliances with grassroots organisations from within China and in the diaspora. As I have said, there are many creative forms of resistance to authoritarian and conservative nationalism within China and among the diaspora. The Western left space is not particularly used to hearing voices that are critical of both Western imperialism and non-Western

authoritarianism, as well as drawing linkages between them. Sometimes, the concern about racism and not wanting to encourage imperialist foreign policies leads to an unwillingness to engage with criticisms of the Chinese state, including those from Chinese nationals and from minoritised groups in China.

Yao Lin conceptualises this as what he calls 'interregimatic missolidarisation'. By this he means an ostensibly supportive relationship that does not really correspond to struggles against injustice or oppression within a different regime. This is not only due to cultural or linguistic distance, but also because of the ways in which different structures give rise to different forms of injustice, creating both experiential and discursive barriers to transnational solidarity.[130] Our conversations with diaspora Chinese organisers engaged in anti-racist, queer, feminist, and decolonial work reflect this. Their lived experiences are often exoticised or dismissed by 'mainstream' civil society, and they find it easier to connect with or be understood by other immigrant groups.

This also brings to mind Shadi Mokhatari's critique of the 'uncritical anti-imperialist solidarities' and the victimhood politics of the 'anti-imperialist-branding states'. Here again, allegedly anti-imperialist actors mis-solidarise with the oppressor, conflate the state with citizens at large, as well as essentialist notions of culture, and disregard the agency of the oppressed.[131] A particular strand of decolonial discourse has been characterised by this kind of misguided anti-imperialism and cultural essentialism. In *The Politics of Decolonial Investigations*, for example, Walter Mignolo argues that countries like China and Russia are leading the process of 'de-Westernization' and 'civilizational resurgence' against 'neoliberal globalism.[132] This vision of the so-called 'multipolar civilizational order' bears a disturbing resemblance to that of the European far right, where racial-civilisational categories are defined in terms of ontological and epistemological difference and 'indigenous' civilisational identity is placed in opposition to the 'globalist' order.[133]

For me, then, solidarity requires calling out this misplaced equation of geopolitical opposition with decolonisation or emancipation. It requires listening to and understanding the lived experiences of activists from across the Global South who are organising against authoritarianism and imperialism. Historically speaking, and in the aftermath of 1989, overseas Chinese pro-democracy politics tended to be aligned with the right in Europe and the US. But this is changing. Younger diaspora groups are now looking for new languages and imaginaries, creating decentralised spaces of resistance and solidarity. They are *already* building transnational alliances against the far right in many ways. What remains is for established left-wing movements to recognise, engage with, and support these emergent transnational practices.

BIO

Chenchen Zhang is a TNI fellow and an associate professor in international relations at Durham University and director of the Centre for Contemporary Chinese Studies. Her research interests lie broadly within critical IR, political geography, and cultural studies and she is also co-editor of Geopolitics and an editorial team member of Made in China Journal.

TECHWASHING AND FASCIST POLITICS: Israel's 'Start-Up Nation' laboratory

Clément Segal

Israel has sold itself as a laboratory for positive tech innovation that obscure its development of digital technologies that underpin state systems of violence and mass surveillance. This techwashing legitimises occupation and oppression at home and inspires authoritarian tech-dystopias worldwide.

At the United Nation's AI for Good Summit in 2025, Elon Musk's Cybertruck gleamed under the spotlights while Abeba Birhane – one of the world's most respected AI ethicists – was silenced when she dared to name Big Tech's complicity in the Palestinian Genocide.[134] The message could not be clearer: the spectacle of innovation matters more than the people it harms. Welcome to techwashing – the art of using the glossy image of innovation to hide, sanitise, or justify violence.

Techno-fascism builds on this logic, on which much has already been written.[135] Here, I use the term as the convergence of capitalist power, militarised control, and technological authority in a system that erodes democratic norms, tramples on fundamental freedoms, and scapegoats racialised or marginalised social groups. It is a political economy where tech-driven fantasies of efficiency, security, and disruption become tools of domination.

Israel embodies this model. Branded as the 'Start-Up Nation', the country presents itself as a laboratory of innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurial resilience. From Tel Aviv to Silicon Valley, the Start-Up Nation narrative functions as an 'innovation cult'[136] that rebrands permanent war economies, widening inequalities, and racialised violence as signs of modernity. Technology is elevated as positive or even liberating, while in practice it becomes the architecture of control and systemic violence: automated targeting systems, predictive policing tools, border tech, and mass surveillance.

And yet, for many – from business school students to start-up founders, self-proclaimed 'progressives' to liberals – technology and start-ups still carry the aura of progress, efficiency and 'coolness'. Following the attacks of 7 October, over 500 French tech entrepreneurs expressed solidarity with Israel[137]: 'We have been inspired and shaped by the values of Israeli tech [...] rooted in the famous 'chutzpah' [audacity]'. Over 100 German corporations united behind the 'Never Again, is Now' pledge against antisemitism,[138] while more than 800 venture capital firms praised 'Israel's technological contributions and commitment to progress'.[139] These statements reveal how deeply the myth of the Start-Up Nation has seeped into Western capitalist imagination, viewing Israel as a modern, innovative democracy.

This myth must be dismantled. Using Israel as a case study this essay highlights how the agendas of authoritarian and far-right systems have long relied on the glow of technological modernity, the legitimisation of ultra-neoliberal policies, militarism, and settler-colonialism. Today, techwashing is the central strategy of techno-fascist regimes; Innovation and 'Progress'[140] the infrastructure of state violence.

The origin of Israeli techno-fascism

Early Zionism drew deeply on nineteenth-century European ideologies: white supremacy, racial hierarchies, colonialism, nation states, fascism, and messianic evangelism. Like Italian futurism under Mussolini,[141] Zionism admired progress, science, and technological transformation. The movement and its early state apparatus were led largely by scientists and technocrats, often inspired by German colonial models.[142] Innovation and technology became central political forces shaping

collective life. Jewish people were invited to reinvent themselves as a new kind of subject, embodied in Max Nordau's concept of 'Muscular Judaism'[143] and the Zionist ideal of Nietzche's 'Übermensch' [superhuman]. The early settlers were thus the ideological ancestors of today's Israeli entrepreneurs.

Theodor Herzl's The Jewish State[144] best articulates this technocratic and civilisational agenda. He repeatedly underscores the role of science and modernity, insisting that 'the establishment of a Jewish state presupposes the application of scientific methods'. The pamphlet's concluding promise – that 'the world will be freed by our liberty, enriched by our wealth, magnified by our greatness… and whatever we attempt there will react powerfully and beneficially for the good of humanity' – encapsulates the techno-civilisational mission at the heart of the early Zionist project.

The colonisation of Palestine was, as Herzl had planned, framed as a civilising project in which European science and technology justified the settlement of Israel and the massive displacement of Palestinians. 'The Jews have made us prosperous, why should we be angry with them?', asked Rashi Bey, the only Arab character in Herzl's novel Altneuland.[145] Agricultural, medical, and technological achievements, such as 'making the desert bloom', were portrayed as evidence of moral righteousness, beneficial to both Jews and the indigenous Palestinian population, masking the violence of colonisation and presenting dispossession as progress.[146]

This logic mirrors European colonial practices, where claims of economic and environmental improvement justified land appropriation and the subjugation of local populations[147]. The ideological and material roots of Israel's Start-Up Nation narrative thus lie squarely in this technocratic colonial lineage.

An innovation or 'killing lab'?

The technocratic governance structures of the 1920s laid the foundations for today's seamless fusion of high-tech, militarism, and politics, a 'military-technological complex' that defines Israel's political economy. After the 1967 war and the occupation of the West Bank, Gaza, the Golan Heights, and East Jerusalem, military technocrats moved into civilian administration. Working closely with politicians, they developed policies that nurtured the high-tech sector: subsidies, deregulation, incentives for foreign investors, and flexible export controls.[148] Support from the United States (US), which always saw Israel as its imperialist bastion in the Middle East, was decisive. Beginning with the 1977 BIRD Foundation, Washington poured millions into Israel's nascent tech sector and opened doors to US markets. In the 1990s, the Yozma programme ignited Israel's venture-capital (VC) industry through massive state co-investment. These foundations were strengthened by sweeping neoliberal reforms from the 1980s and deepened under Netanyahu: privatised state assets, tax cuts, liberalised markets, and accelerated flows of foreign capital.

Israel thus became a global techno-fascist hub, with over 430 multinationals with offices in the country, alongside 350 VC firms. Israel hosts around 9,000 start-ups, with 130 companies listed on NASDAQ. High-tech now generates roughly 20% of gross domestic product (GDP), 56% of exports, and 25% of tax revenue.

What was the cost of building a Start-up Nation? Even Zionist commentators are now criticising a failed state:[149] 'A Jewish state in which its citizens live in poverty, inequality, or lives of quiet economic desperation is, at best, a very bitter joke'. Israel is among the most unequal members of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) with 20% living under the poverty line. Tel Aviv is one of the world's most expensive cities, and the country faces a deep

housing crisis (another reason for its settler-colonial project in the West Bank). Not to mention the (economic) apartheid that Palestinian Israelis experience ('48 Palestinians'), demonstrated by their lack of infrastructure, including anti-missile shelters.

While most politicians came from the armed forces, a new generation moves between politics and high-tech: the former prime minister Naftali Bennett sold two tech companies for over US$250 million before entering politics; Ehud Barak is the founder of a spyware start-up, President Isaac Herzog is an angel investor and former officer in Unit 8200, Israel's elite cyber warfare unit. Chemi Peres, the son of Shimon Peres, is a leading venture capitalist.

In 2024, as Israel escalated its assault on Gaza, its military budget rose by 65% to US$46.5 billion, 8.8% of GDP and projected to grow by another 20% in 2025. Military exports also hit a record US$14.8 billion. Maintaining a settler-colonial regime of ongoing occupation and dispossession provides a laboratory for weapons, tested on Palestinians and then exported as 'battle-proven' technologies to democracies and dictatorships alike.[150] Israel has long supplied arms to conflicts, coups in Latin America, and genocidal forces, including Rwanda, where Hutu militias had Uzis, and apartheid South Africa, whose Bantustan model was praised by Ariel Sharon as a template for pacifying Palestinians.[151]

The broader high-tech ecosystem – AI, cybersecurity, agritech, digital health – anchors Israel's global influence. Even as Big Tech AI-powered systems facilitate genocide[152] in Gaza, deals such as Google's US$32 billion purchase of the cybersecurity firm Wiz or Palo Alto Networks' US$25 billion acquisition of CyberArk show the deep ties between global markets and this economy of violence. Thousands of global companies benefit from this economy of genocide, as highlighted in the recent report by the UN Special Rapporteur on human rights in the Occupied Territories.[153]

This 'battleship of Israel's economy'[154] needs to be dismantled. It is not enough to boycott arms companies or firms profiting directly from illegal settlements: the entire start-up ecosystem underpins Israel's ethno-fascist high-tech state. Political economists such as Shir Hever note that Israel's extreme dependence on a militarised high-tech sector that employs barely 10% of the workforce creates a bubble that may threaten the state's long-term survival. With the rising costs of permanent occupation, militarisation and a deepening neoliberal fascist populism, especially after 7 October, the 'Start-Up Nation' façade is cracking.[155]

The deadly Hamas attack of 7 October hit at the heart of the high-tech elite, including the son of a former government minister and the daughter of an Israeli tech billionaire, once celebrated in Israel for promoting 'peace' by employing Palestinians. The assault exposed the limits of Israel's technological hubris: the Start-Up Nation was undone by low-tech means, while Unit 8200 had months of warnings but failed to act.[156] Israel's response, by contrast, was one of technological overkill: AI-driven targeting systems like Lavender, automated warfare like Gospel.[157]

While some predict that Israel will become a failed state, we should not to wait for Israel's potential collapse. Civil society needs to deconstruct the myth of Israel as a progressive, unassailable tech 'bastion'. This begins by ensuring that business leaders, tech workers, business school students, and techno-optimists understand that Israel is not a model of innovation serving humanity, but a state whose high-tech sector underpins ongoing occupation and ethnonationalism. Only by challenging the perception of 'the Start-Up Nation' will it be possible to exert coordinated pressure on politicians, sanctions, and achieve systemic change.

Deconstructing Israel's 'Start-up Nation': a marketing construct

The idea of a modern, progressive Israel is the result of a deliberate state-sponsored rebranding campaign. The Start-Up Nation discourse casts Israel as an open, creative, secular, Western society, strategically obscuring the political realities of occupation.

The second Intifada (2000–2005) tarnished Israel's global image, especially among younger generations, who increasingly associated the country with colonisation, violence, and religious nationalism rather than with democracy or progress. In this context, Ido Aharoni, who joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in 2002, began promoting 'nation branding' as a new form of public diplomacy. He founded the Brand Israel Group, laying the groundwork for a strategy to shift international attention away from the conflict and towards a carefully curated set of 'positive' narratives.

Backed by vast government funding, and supported by figures such as Shimon Peres, Ariel Sharon, and Avigdor Lieberman, Aharoni's team partnered with global PR and marketing firms. Their premise was simple: since most international audiences are indifferent to the conflict, the most effective tactic is not persuasion but distraction. The new story about Israel centred on dynamism, innovation, cuisine, wine, culture, renewable energy, water technologies, sports, and the LGBT-friendly Tel Aviv.

This strategy produced various image-laundering practices: pinkwashing,[158] promoting Israel as a gay-friendly haven; greenwashing by highlighting environmental technologies and how Israel 'made the desert bloom';[159] veganwashing ('the most vegan army in the world')[160], and of course techwashing, positioning the country as the 'Start-up Nation'. The 'creative energy' campaign, launched in 2010, encapsulated this logic, branding Israel as 'a dynamic and energetic place; a place whose substance is building a better future; and entrepreneurial enthusiasm':

> *'The goal is not to replace the conflict, but to become a multidimensional brand. I want to be in the situation where someone says: "I don't agree with your policies towards the Palestinians, but you invented this medical camera that saved my mom's life–and I appreciate that".'* – Ido Aharoni citing Amir Reshef Gissin (former director of the Hasbara department)[161]

For Hasbara, the government's propaganda apparatus, this novel aim was to present Israel to the US and Europe as cosmopolitan, progressive, Westernised, and democratic, in contrast with the supposedly 'backward, repressive, homophobic' Islamic nations surrounding it. This, in turn, reinforced the idea that Israel's aggression was not imperialism but the defence of democracy and freedom.[162] Israel was to be known less for checkpoints and more for mobile apps, medical devices, wine exports, and gay pride parades. The strategic implications were clear: if Israeli technology became indispensable to global capitalism, boycotts would be nearly impossible, echoing Hasbara ambassadors Youssef Haddad and Emily Shrader's anti-Boycott propaganda video.[163] Becoming a 'Start-Up Nation' was therefore not just about prestige; it was a structural defence against the Boycott, Divest and Sanctions (BDS) movement (launched in 2005), ensuring that media, political elites, and above all economic leaders, would perceive Israel as a vital partner. This logic was presented at the 2010 Herzliya Conference, organised by the Reut Institute, 'Winning the Battle of the Narrative.'[164] Bringing together the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Anti-Defamation League, NGO Monitor, and the Britain Israel Communications and Research Centre (BICOM), the conference sought 'imaginative, effective and fruitful solutions' to the 'scourge' of BDS. The task, as they framed it, was not only to 'defend' Israel's reputation but to go on the offensive – crafting narratives in which criticism of Israel was marginalised by stories of innovation and progress.

The Start-Up Nation

> *'Our book Start-Up Nation showed that every conversation about Israel doesn't have to be about the settlements.'* – Dan Senor, co-author

The Start-Up Nation was popularised by Dan Senor and Saul Singer's 2009 bestseller, Start-up Nation: The Story of Israel's Economic Miracle. In many ways, it did more for the country's branding than any official government campaign. Today, a Google search for 'Start-up Nation' immediately leads to Israel. With over a million copies sold and rights licensed in more than 30 countries, the book became a powerful promotional tool – precisely because it appeared to be independent, offering what looked like an 'objective' account of Israel's economic miracle.

But the book is far from neutral. It was published under the aegis of the Washington-based Council on Foreign Relations, a powerful conservative and pro-Israel think-tank. Senor, a former George W Bush adviser and senior official in post-invasion Iraq, and Singer, a Jerusalem Post journalist and former US congressional adviser, interviewed CEOs of major US corporations, top Israeli leaders, and entrepreneurs. The foreword is by Shimon Peres, and the book includes conversations with Benjamin Netanyahu, and acknowledgements thanking 'Bibi', reflecting their recognition of the book's potential to shape global perceptions of Israel.

Start-up Nation celebrates militarisation and a war economy dressed up in the language of neoliberal economics. Military service is presented as the jumpstart for aspiring techies, soldiers becoming 'battlefield entrepreneurs' (title of Chapter 2). Nowhere does it mention the annual US$3.8 billion from the US that underpins Israel's economy, nor the US$310 billion (adjusted for inflation) in total economic and military assistance since 1948. Nor any reference to the occupation, not one word in the entire book. The authors even present the Six-Day War as a decisive bonanza for infrastructure and technological development. In short, Start-up Nation is a pro-Israel manifesto dressed up as business analysis. It offers a carefully curated myth that flatters Israel's leaders and their allies abroad. As Senor said, 'One could make the argument that the ultimate antidote to delegitimisation, isolation, and divestment is legitimisation, integration, and investment'.[165]

From bestseller to bureaucracy: Innovation as Statecraft

The 'Start-Up Nation' narrative was rapidly institutionalised. Just a few years after the book's publication, Startup Nation Central (SNC) was founded in Tel Aviv – a supposedly apolitical 'free acting NGO' that promotes Israel's tech ecosystem worldwide. In reality, SNC is 95% financed by the US billionaire Paul Singer, a central figure in neoconservative circles, major Republican donor, close Netanyahu ally, and the former employer of co-author Dan Senor, in its hedge fund Eliott Investments.[166] Singer, Senor, and Ron Dermer – who recently resigned as Israel's Minister of Strategic Affairs – form a closed circle of pro-Netanyahu, ultra-conservative Republicans, tied to Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential campaign and openly opposed to Palestinian statehood.[167]

> *'The argument is: Israel's startups contribute to humanity on a daily basis, from water to agriculture to medicine. If you boycott Israel, you are basically boycotting humanity.'* – Paul Singer, CEO of Eliott Management[168]

The authors of Start-Up Nation helped shape the narrative and then built the institution that perpetuates it: they co-founded SNC [169] and remained on its board for years. Wendy Senor-Singer is Dan Senor's sister and the wife of Saul Singer. After a 17-year career at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the main US pro-Israel lobby, she served as SNC's first director (2013–

2022), working alongside Eugene Kandel, Netanyahu's former economic advisor. These overlapping relations reveal a political family network rather than an independent civil society organisation (CSO).

This 'NGO' has over 100 staff, including former diplomats and Unit 8200 intelligence officers. In reality, SNC was created not only to counter BDS but also to advance Netanyahu's strategy of integrating Israel's military-tech complex into global markets[170], most notably by placing former military and intelligence officers in key roles across major tech companies, for boycotts to become structurally impossible. This tactic has been documented by investigations from MintPress[171] and, more recently, Drop Site, which traced Big Tech's systematic recruitment of Unit 8200 alumni.[172]

> *'[Exporting technology] is very much my plan. What I ended up doing was to trim the public sector, help the private sector and remove the barriers to competition. I fight regulation with machetes[...] because having reformed the Israeli economy, we got the prowess of technological advance [...] This is a triangle. It's economic power and security power that gives you diplomatic power.'* – Benjamin Netanyahu (interviewed by Fox News in 2018)[173]

Today, SNC sits at the heart of Israel's techwashing strategy: Israel exports a polished 'innovation playbook' to draw in investors, corporations, and governments. As with any start-up pitch, the image precedes the substance, and the narrative becomes a self-fulfilling source of legitimacy. SNC is more than propaganda, it hosts policymakers, tours for corporate delegations, sends entrepreneurs abroad, and seals business deals that blend innovation with diplomacy, turning Israel's high-tech 'miracle' into a geopolitical shield. Even during the genocide, Israeli start-ups operated in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) under SNC's umbrella.

> *'I want France to be a Start-up Nation, a nation that works with start-ups, but also thinks and acts like them.'* – Emmanuel Macron, in a 2017 speech at Vivatech

Under the banner of 'Innovation Diplomacy,'[174] Israel has turned its high-tech ecosystem into a tool of foreign policy: a way to counter BDS pressure, strengthen alliances, and expand geopolitical reach across liberal democracies and authoritarian regimes alike. The 'Start-Up Nation' narrative has inspired governments worldwide, from French Tech in Macron's 2015 visit to Israel, to the Baltic states, and Romania's cybersecurity partnerships. In Africa, the fusion of high tech, aid and militarism is even clearer: Israel has signed cooperation deals with Kenya and Rwanda, while companies like Netafim (agriculture) and Mekorot (water) operate as extensions of state policy. Projects framed as humanitarian innovation, such as the Green Horizon initiative in South Sudan, served as fronts for arms deals worth $150 million to both sides of the civil war, despite international embargoes.[175] Meanwhile, Israel's 'spyware diplomacy' paved the way for normalisation with African countries and Arab states through the Abraham Accords: NSO Group's Pegasus was sold to governments from Morocco to Ghana, Egypt the UAE and Saudi Arabia, facilitating the global repression of journalists and human rights defenders.[176]

Start-Up Nation and the SNC institution are two pillars of the same techwashing strategy, mutually reinforcing myth and machinery, constructing Israel's image as a fortress of innovation. Using the language of 'progress' it provides a replicable playbook to legitimise ultra-neoliberal policies, militarism, and settler-colonialism.

> *'In a world seeking the key to innovation, Israel is a natural place to look. The West needs innovation; Israel's got it.'* – Start-Up Nation (Introduction, p.20)

This narrative of technological bastion is inseparable from a broader ideology of exceptionalism and orientalism. Start-Up Nation fosters this portrayal of Israeli traits like chutzpah or bitzuism ('getting the job done') as drivers of success, while depicting neighbouring Arabs as backward or hostile.[177] In this framework, Israel becomes not just a nation, but a start-up itself: the West's last bastion of civilisation and progress against a supposedly regressive East, dangerously echoing the controversial ethnocentric controversial thesis of Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations, praised and cited in the Israeli innovation bible. Several investigations have shown how right-wing conservatives, such as Sheldon Adelson (one of Trump's first supporters), Paul Singer (SNC's patron), Irving Moskowitz, and Bernard Marcus, among many others, are funding Western Islamophobic think-tanks as well as Zionist pro-settlement organisations, proving the civilisational agenda.[178] Israel has also had a strong influence in spreading Great Replacement theory, notably through Bat Ye'or's Islamophobic conspiracies, Eurabia, that following the 1973 crisis, Arabs blackmailed the West to provide oil in exchange for mass immigration and Europe's Islamisation.[179] This reminds us of Israeli propaganda following 7 October: 'The West is Next', a hashtag and slogan that has been widely shared from official Zionist accounts.

'Rome and Jerusalem are both the targets of radical Islam: Israel is on the frontline, but the West is next.' – Emmanuel Navon, CEO of ELNET Israel[180]

ELNET: the embodiment of techwashing and civilisational narrative

It is important also to explore the European Leadership Network, ELNET, the continent's equivalent of the AIPAC in the US. This 'non-partisan organisation working to strengthen relations between Europe and Israel by promoting political, strategic, and diplomatic cooperation based on shared democratic values and mutual strategic interests' builds technological bridges between the European Union (EU) and Israel, while cultivating political alliances against Islam(ism) in the name of secularism and progress. At an ELNET-organised 4,000-person event in Paris in March 2025, France's Minister of the Interior, Bruno Retailleau, publicly declared 'Down with the veil', equating Muslim women's clothing with extremism.

Technological advancement further reinforces Israel's civilisational agenda, portraying the country as a beacon of modernity and the Western fortress in an allegedly 'backward' Islamic region. ELNET works closely with SNC. In 2020, they established the German-Israeli Network of Startups

& Mittelstand (GINSUM), connecting Israeli start-ups with medium-sized German companies, with state co-funding. While SNC sends business delegations abroad to secure deals, ELNET brings European policymakers and politicians to Israel to craft a positive narrative, showcasing innovation as a tool of soft power. Delegation agendas combine emotional visits to sites such as Yad Vashem or the Nova Festival with tours of Israeli start-ups and research centres, highlighting Horizon Europe-funded projects. This dual strategy legitimises Israel internationally while deepening EU–Israel ties.[181]

In sum, SNC and ELNET form a complementary system. SNC promotes Israel's innovativeness, progress, and business opportunities to the world, projecting a narrative technological salvation; while ELNET advocates for closer European cooperation, fostering diplomatic and political support and reinforcing Israel's civilisational myth and framing it as an indispensable partner. Together, they institutionalise a narrative that blends tech diplomacy and political influence, ensuring Israel's global positioning as both a start-up hub and a strategic actor in international relations.

High-Tech Zionism and GAZA crypto-currency

Entrepreneurship and high-tech are central to Israel's state-building and national identity, with innovation framed as a political project. It governs citizens or subjects, sustains nationalist infrastructure, and projects power abroad. Technology reinforces Zionism itself, deepening belonging to Israel's supranational project. I term this fusion of technology and statecraft High-Tech Zionism. The state actively cultivates citizens as high-tech entrepreneurs who advance national development and serve as ambassadors of the Start-up Nation, while mobilising and steering civic participation through a state-orchestrated social-media strategy to defend Israel online.

High-Tech Zionism also facilitates the privatisation of state functions under the veneer of 'apolitical' engagement. 'Peacebuilding' is outsourced to people-to-people initiatives like Tech2Peace, or embodied by the Shimon Peres Center for Peace & Innovation to 'bring people together'[182]; surveillance and cyber-espionage are delegated to private firms such as NSO Group or Toka (founded by former prime minister Ehud Barak); international development projects are channelled through non-profits like Nura Global Innovation Lab or Innovation:Africa – whose presentation video is brazenly neo-colonial[183]; and diplomacy flows through institutional actors like SNC or lobby groups like ELNET.

High-Tech Zionism is inherently transnational. The 'Israeli high-tech identity' is exportable: start-ups and their global networks carry the state's values abroad, legitimising Israel's actions and raison d'être under the banner of progress, innovation, and entrepreneurial capitalism. Unsurprisingly, this narrative resonates strongly in Silicon Valley.

Balaji Srinivasan, the former partner at mega-fund Andreessen-Horowitz (whose founders just endorsed Donald Trump) and ex-CTO of Coinbase, advocates the end of nation-states and democracy in favour of 'Network States' of sovereign tech territories. 'What I'm really calling for is something like Tech Zionism':[184] seizing territory to build a patchwork of start-up societies, bound not by democracy but by capital. Projects like Prospera in Honduras, Praxis Nation, or AfroPolitan, are popping up. The techno-fascist Curtis Yarvin theorised this model as early as 2008 in his Patchwork essays, now explicitly calling for democracy to be replaced by a corporate-tech dictatorship. In his blog, Gray Mirror, he even proposed a cryptocurrency called GAZA as a 'solution to the conflict' – suggesting what 'network-state' governance might look like there, post-genocide.[185]

> 'Trump may not grasp the theory behind the Network State. But he embodies it: authoritarianism disguised as innovation. Sovereignty sold to the highest bidder. Capitalism without constraint. Fascism — maybe with flying cars.' Gil Duran[186]

Investigations by the Financial Times and a leaked prospectus from the Washington Post[187] detail the GREAT Trust (Gaza Reconstitution, Economic Acceleration, and Transformation Trust): a US-administered, ten-year reconstruction plan for Gaza to become a tech-enabled Riviera, promoting 'voluntary relocation' for all Gazans. Trusteeship and relocation plans are cynical euphemisms for (neo)-colonialism and ethnic cleansing. The Gaza project involves the Boston Consulting Group, Tony Blair Institute (heavily funded by Oracle's Tech Lord Larry Ellison[188]), real-estate moguls like Steven Witkoff, Israeli-American venture capitalists like Michael Eisenberg, and former IDF Unit 8200 alumnus Liran Tancman, among others. This techno-utopia, powered by desalination, solar energy, and high-tech manufacturing, is portrayed as prosperity by some, by others a gruesome and potentially realistic dystopia: the true definition of techwashing.

Globalised Techwashing Against any Intifada

Israel's Start-up Nation and progressivism is less a tale of entrepreneurial genius than a carefully curated myth designed to legitimise authoritarian militarism and neoliberal economic policies. But techwashing is not unique to Israel but a global strategy. Take Saudi Arabia's US$500-billion NEOM project, branded as a futuristic eco-city and a beacon of innovation. Behind the glossy marketing lie mass dispossession and the death of tens of thousands of migrant workers: progress built on exploitation and repression. Or El Salvador, where President Nayib Bukele – recently re-elected, despite a constitutional prohibition – is building the first 'Bitcoin City, arresting nearly 100,000 people in mass sweeps while proudly styling himself 'the world's coolest dictator'. 'El Salvador's governance model follows Bitcoin. It's not a democracy, it's a startup nation,' declared Max Keiser,

Bukele's crypto-evangelist adviser. Here the authoritarian techno-turn is on full display: a digital utopia masking brute repression.

Even in countries that pride themselves on their liberal traditions, such as France, neoliberalism has dismantled the traditional left–right political axis. As Tariq Ali warned in The Extreme Centre, this vacuum becomes a springboard for authoritarianism.[189] Here too, tech progressivism obscures material interests and enables dangerous alliances between capital and the far right. One striking example is Pierre-Edouard Stérin, a Christian-extremist billionaire and 'tax exile' who funds Macron's Startup Nation while investing hundreds of millions through VC firms across Europe, and pouring €150 million into his 'Pericles' plan to bring the far right to power.[190] His model? The US, where Silicon Valley has long fused entrepreneurial myth-making with reactionary politics. What he dreams of is nothing less than a 'French Elon Musk'– a messianic entrepreneur who embodies profit, growth, and alleged Christian values.[191] This is the epitome of techno-utopian aesthetics married to reactionary politics.

Innovation, in this framework, becomes both the means and the end of a global authoritarian revival. Technology is not neutral: it is a political project, inseparable from capitalism, militarism, and ethno-nationalism. Palestine has long been the compass of social justice struggles. Israel's 'Start-Up Nation' is simply the clearest case study of how technology can be deployed to launder state violence, deflect criticism, and cement transnational fascist and far-right alliances. By unpacking how 'progress' is weaponised, we can begin to resist the seductive aesthetics of techwashing, and expose what lies beneath the shiny surface.

Technology creates the kind of mass society that echoes the definition of fascism – a world where citizens are absorbed, almost lobotomised, by a security-obsessed discourse and omnipresent techno solutionism. People do not merely endure the system, but participate in it, embracing technology as an all-encompassing, deeply political project. This technophile membrane legitimises both the actions of Big Tech and authoritarian policies. Progress and innovation are the glossy veneers, while human rights are pushed ever further into the background.

What we need is a collective wake-up call across civil society and social justice movements, but most urgently within the high-tech sector itself. Tech workers and users need to cut ties with Israeli firms and any companies complicit in genocide and reclaim the emancipatory promise of technology by returning to its roots: open-source, decentralised, committed to freedom and equality – not captured by the regimes that wield it to entrench domination and colonialism. Movements are already showing the way: Tech for Palestine, No Tech for Apartheid, No Azure for Apartheid, No Tech for Tyrants in the UK, Tech Workers Coalition in the US and Germany, and Tribe X in France. Their struggle points to the future. Our task is to join it.

BIO

Clément Segal is a former tech worker who returned to academia and now works for the European Network Against Racism. His work spans research, writing, and political organising. He defines himself through three core identities: as an anti-zionist Jew who is racialised as Arab; as a European, French-Austrian, born in Germany; and as a leftist committed to decolonisation and social justice. This essays builds on his Master's thesis, Deconstructing the Israeli Start-Up Nation.

THE RISE OF THE TECHNO-TYRANTS: Silicon Valley's right-wing past, present and future

Roberto J. González

The Silicon Valley has thrown much of its support behind Trump for reasons of opportunism, appeasement or fear. But the roots for its fascist turn were laid long before by a culture steeped in racial hierarchies, jingoism, and militaristic utopian visions.

Among the many iconic images of the US presidential inauguration ceremony in late January 2025, one was particularly striking. The world's most powerful tech industry elites dutifully lined up to pay homage to Donald Trump, 'kissing the ring' of the new leader.[192] The CEOs of Alphabet-Google, Amazon, Meta, and X (formerly Twitter) – Sundar Pichai, Jeff Bezos, Mark Zuckerberg, and Elon Musk respectively – were prominently seated in the second row, behind Trump's inner circle of family and friends.

Together, the four tech titans have a net worth of nearly US$ 1 trillion; their companies have a combined market capitalisation of some US$ 9 trillion. They are among the most powerful CEOs on the planet. Astute observers noted that Trump's cabinet nominees were seated *behind* the billionaires, perhaps indicating their relatively insignificant roles in the new administration. The ceremony was held in the US Capitol rotunda, in the same building where the country's two legislative bodies meet, and where far-right Trump supporters launched a short-lived insurrection on 6 January 2021. (Trump pardoned the vast majority of the rioters on his first day back in office.)

The inaugural spectacle signalled a tectonic shift in the tech elites' political alignments. In 2016, as Trump campaigned against Hillary Clinton, Jeff Bezos noted that Trump's hinting that he might not concede an electoral loss 'erodes our democracy around the edges'. He added, 'To try and chill the media and threaten retribution, retaliation – which is what he has done in a number of cases to people involved in the media – is not appropriate'.[193] Elon Musk also expressed reservations about Trump: 'He doesn't seem to have the sort of character that reflects well on the United States', he said.[194] Sam Altman, founder and CEO of Open AI, tweeted in 2017: 'I think Trump is terrible and few things would make me happier than him not being president'.[195]

Such sentiments – combined with a sense that Silicon Valley and other US tech hubs have long been bastions of liberalism – gave some the impression that Trumpism and far-right politics would never take hold in the tech industry, or among its business leaders. That impression was wrong. Altman, Bezos, Musk and many other tech elites now support a right-wing agenda. What makes these changes even more troubling is that fact that the tech billionaires' shifting political inclinations are not affecting only the US, but are having a global impact. For example, in recent years, Elon Musk has enthusiastically supported far-right candidates in at least 18 countries, across six continents.[196]

The rightwards shift is not just symbolic. Apart from Musk's sudden entry into the world of government as the head of Trump's new Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) during the first few months of 2025 – an organisation that, according to Reuters, eliminated more than 250,000 federal jobs during the first five months of the year – other changes are underway.[197] In July 2025, AI firms such as Google, Open AI, xAI, and Anthropic secured Defense Department contracts worth hundreds of millions of dollars to incorporate large learning models for national security applications, ushering in a new era in militarised AI.[198] Amazon, Google, Meta, Microsoft and other tech firms phased out their diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) policies, apparently capitulating to Trump's 'anti-woke' agenda.

The billionaires' philanthropic priorities also appear to have changed dramatically. Last year, the Bezos Earth Fund (founded by Jeff Bezos) reportedly changed its policies, towards a corporate-friendly carbon-offsets strategy.[199] In early 2025, the Chan-Zuckerberg Initiative (founded by Mark Zuckerberg and his wife Priscilla Chan) announced that the organization would shift away from social advocacy projects and programmes supporting primary schools in low-income San Francisco Bay Area communities, a move that will leave hundreds of parents scrambling to find other options.[200]

Opportunism, appeasement, fear – or perhaps all three – might help to explain the tech billionaires' rightwards turn. But there are also other factors to consider. To begin with, it's easy to forget that Silicon Valley, the birthplace of the tech industry, has historically been steeped in an ethos of 'winner-takes-all' capitalism, strict racial hierarchies, jingoism, and militaristic utopian visions. These ideas were common among the US ruling class 150 years ago and they are well aligned with elements of today's far-right ideologues. The past is a vivid backdrop to the present.

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There is a recurring narrative about Silicon Valley, one that many in the region often tell themselves, and that others repeat without much reflection. It goes something like this: Silicon Valley was built by smart, enterprising young men who embodied the US virtues of individualism, entrepreneurship and free markets. In this history, the city of Palo Alto looms large, as does its most venerable institution, Stanford University, which was founded in 1885 by the railroad magnate, robber baron – and later, California governor – Leland Stanford.

In a recent book chronicling Palo Alto's history, the journalist Malcolm Harris describes an ideology that has gripped the region since the 1849 Gold Rush. Harris calls it the 'Palo Alto System', and it hinges on maximising (and normalising) the exploitation of people, land, and the natural environment.[201] It is characterised by a fanatical obsession with increasing productivity and amassing wealth. The Palo Alto System squared well with social evolutionism, a theory fashionable in the late 1800s that seemed to explain why some societies were more 'civilised' than others. It appeared to provide a scientific basis for justifying racial inequality, colonialism, and the concentration of power in the hands of a select group of (mostly white) men. So too did the science of eugenics, championed by several influential figures at Stanford, including the university's first president, David Starr Jordan, and the renowned psychologist Lewis Terman.

I mention these facts not to suggest that one can draw a straight line from northern California's peculiar history of hyper-capitalism, periodic manifestations of race 'science', and segregation to more recent manifestations of 'technofascism', but rather to illustrate that crucial components of Silicon Valley's reactionary far-right agenda have circulated for at least 150 years, even before the birth of European fascism.[202] You might say these ideas and practices are in the region's DNA, periodically expressing themselves across generations.

Silicon Valley's origins are tightly linked to the growth of Stanford University from the 1940s, owing largely to the work of Frederick Terman (Lewis Terman's son) who was dean of the university's engineering school from 1944 to 1958, and provost from 1955 to 1965. In the early 1950s, and with cooperation from the city of Palo Alto, Terman succeeded in dedicating part of Stanford's expansive campus to an industrial park. He encouraged promising graduate students to create companies and move them to 'the Park' with the idea of facilitating collaboration between academics and the nascent tech industry. By 1957, dozens of companies had established research and development (R&D) centres there, including Hewlett-Packard, General Electric and Lockheed. Terman forged

close relationships between Stanford and the US military during the Cold War by steering much of the university's research towards the development of military technologies including microwaves and electronic warfare systems.[203] Terman's outsized impact on the region has led many to call him 'the father of Silicon Valley'.[204]

Another man credited with helping to transform Silicon Valley into the epicentre of the tech industry was William Shockley, a physicist and engineer whose research team created the world's first transistor in 1956. For this achievement, Shockley – who spent most of his life in Palo Alto and the surrounding area – was awarded the Nobel Prize for Physics, along with his colleagues.

In 1965, two years after accepting a position as an engineering professor at Stanford, Shockley began openly championing eugenics. Among other things, he suggested that Black people were afflicted with 'dysgenesis' or 'retrogressive evolution', and proposed replacing welfare programmes with a 'Voluntary Sterilization Bonus Plan' that would offer cash to 'low IQ' women who agreed to be sterilised.[205] Shockley was roundly criticised by biologists and anthropologists for espousing pseudoscience, but his efforts helped to rehabilitate eugenics as an ideology for future generations. (Some have recently suggested that the 'pro-natalist' movement, which is supported by a surprising number of Silicon Valley tech luminaries, is a modern-day version of eugenic science.)[206]

Digital utopians and the spectre of technofascism

By the late twentieth century, Silicon Valley had developed a reputation as bastion of liberal – if not radical –freethinkers, probably because the San Francisco Bay Area (which includes Silicon Valley) had been home to a succession of bohemian enclaves. From the 1950s and throughout the 1970s, Beat poets, hippies, Deadheads, and communalists flocked to the region. The historian and communications studies scholar Fred Turner draws links between counterculture and cyberculture by documenting how Stewart Brand, Douglas Engelbart and other charismatic figures envisaged a future in which computers might become transcendental vehicles.[207] In this digital utopia, machines would give users the ability to transform their very souls.

In a lengthy and now famous 1972 article for *Rolling Stone* magazine, the enigmatic Brand glorified young 'hackers' and 'computer bums' at Stanford University's Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, and the machines they were bringing to life: 'Ready or not, computers are coming to the people. That's good news, maybe the best since psychedelics', he wrote.[208] For Brand, the 'groovy scientists' were revolutionaries, transforming massive mainframe computers accessible only to experts into small devices that ordinary people could use at home. Brand's ideas morphed into a quirky high-tech anti-authoritarian ideology, premised on the unifying power of networked computers.

Today, little is left of the tech industry's countercultural roots. The anthropologist Jan English-Lueck notes that historically, Silicon Valley has been characterised by an curious mixture of counterculture and capitalism.[209] But by the end of the twentieth century, the few visible remnants of this mash-up tended to be superficial – relaxed dress codes, unorthodox workspaces, hip buzzwords, and seemingly subversive company mottos like 'don't be evil' and 'think different'. Counterculture in Silicon Valley's tech industry had become corporate ideology.

Moreover, by the 1990s it was becoming clear to some observers that a hardcore group of reactionaries were developing a strikingly different vision of Silicon Valley, defined by raw masculinity, unbridled capitalism, and the sanctity of the nuclear family. According to Becca Lewis, a researcher in communications studies, one of Silicon Valley's most fervent right-wing evangelists was the investment

guru George Gilder, who rose among the ranks of Reagan-era conservatives by attacking feminism and the erosion of traditional gender roles. As the US was rapidly becoming a post-industrial state, Gilder resuscitated a cult of entrepreneurship and the idea that business-minded inventors and investors were better prepared to lead the country into a new era than bureaucrats, politicians or academics. In Lewis's words, 'The burgeoning hi-tech industry, he [Gilder] began claiming, was the purest expression of entrepreneurship in the world. It's not surprising that Gilder would be drawn to the tech industry in Santa Clara County, California. …Tech entrepreneurs offered a hopeful way forward for the American economy, for masculinity, and for human progress writ large'.[210]

In response to Gilder's popularity among Silicon Valley tech executives and venture capitalists during the first dot-com boom, the journalist Michael Malone warned: 'Forget digital utopia, we could be headed for technofascism'.[211] His words were prescient.

* * * * *

The tech entrepreneurs who survived the dot-com bust of the early 2000s rapidly took their places in the new order. A younger generation also appeared, eager to make their fortunes by moving fast and breaking things. The start-ups they created became massive companies with names recognised across much of the globe: Amazon, Google, Microsoft, Netflix, PayPal, Uber. The venture capitalists who funded them have reaped enormous profits over the years.

Marc Andreessen, co-founder of the gargantuan venture capitalist (VC) firm Andeessen Horowitz, is arguably Silicon Valley's most influential investor. A software engineer by training, Andreessen co-founded Netscape in the 1990s, which developed the first widely used web browser. When the company was sold, he reportedly made $100 million from the deal.[212] Several years later, he co-founded Andreessen Horowitz with the computer scientist Ben Horowitz.

For years, Andreessen had supported Democratic candidates. From one perspective, it made sense. Bill Clinton, Al Gore, Barack Obama, and Hillary Clinton were all staunchly pro-business champions of the tech industry. In an interview with the *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat, Andreessen calls the alliance between Democrats and tech executives 'the Deal': 'It was just something everybody understood. . .you're an entrepreneur, you're a capitalist, you start a company, you grow a company, and if it works, you make a lot of money. . .and you give the money away. Through that, you absolve yourself of all of your sins. Then in your obituary, it talks about what an incredible person you were. … And by the way, you're a Democrat, you're pro-gay rights, you're pro-abortion, you're pro all the fashionable and appropriate social causes of the time. …This is the Deal'.[213]

Andreessen's description is cartoonish – clearly, not all VC and tech executives accepted 'the Deal' (many hedged their bets by backing both Democrats and Republicans, and some were hardcore libertarians) – but his account provides insight into Silicon Valley's political norms.

It's also worth considering why Andreessen thinks the Deal collapsed in the 2010s: 'What changed basically was the kids. …[c]hildren of the privileged going to the top universities, I think, primarily as a consequence of the global financial crisis and probably [the war in] Iraq …they radicalized hard. …By 2013, the median newly arrived Harvard kid was like, "[expletive] it. We're burning the system down. You are evil. White people are evil. All men are evil. Capitalism is evil. Tech is evil"'.

From Andreessen's perspective, matters got worse as Silicon Valley executives navigated from the chaotic years of the first Trump administration to the regulatory threats that followed. In his words, 'The Biden administration turned out to be far more radical than even we thought that they were

going to be', since it enacted new regulations and 'mandated enforcement of DEI'. Andreessen and Horowitz went to the White House in May 2024 to meet with senior staff in the Biden Administration. They were shocked to hear that if re-elected, the Biden Administration intended to choose two or three big tech firms and regulate them in the interest of national security, even if that meant classifying AI research. 'At this point, we are no longer dealing with rational people', said Andreessen. 'And that's the day we walked out and stood in the parking lot of the West Wing and looked at each other, and we're like, "Yep, we're for Trump"'.[214]

* * * * *

Andreessen's account reveals many things (including a lack of empathy for the tech employees who created wealth for the many companies in his VC firm's portfolio). But it also obscures other elements in Silicon Valley elites' shift towards Trumpism and far-right ideologies.

For example, Andreessen, Peter Thiel (co-founder of PayPal and Palantir) and other tech elites have publicly expressed interest in and admiration for the views of Curtis Yarvin and Balaji Srinivasan, two figures associated with the 'Dark Enlightenment'[215] or neo-reactionary movement.[216] Central to their future vision is the idea that US democracy is a failed experiment that should be replaced with a patchwork of 'network states' where tech leaders maintain authoritarian control over society through extensive surveillance and policing.[217] Both Yarvin and Srinivasan have links with tech's most influential power elites.

Yarvin, a computer scientist, began blogging under the name Mencius Moldbug in 2007. He founded a cloud services start-up called Tlon in 2013, and as he raised money for the company, began meeting tech and VC leaders. A recent profile in *The New Yorker* describes how 'Yarvin became a kind of Machiavelli to his big-tech benefactors, who shared his view that the world would be better off if they were in charge'.[218] Investors included Andreessen Horowitz and Founders Fund, created by Peter Thiel.

Neither Thiel, Andreessen, nor Musk have openly embraced Yarvin's anti-democratic musings, but it seems that they endorse at least some of his neo-monarchical philosophy. Musk's attempt to eviscerate the US federal bureaucracy as de facto head of DOGE appears to be modelled after one of Yarvin's proposals, which he called RAGE (retire all government employees).[219]

Srinivasan is another charismatic member of tech's far-right intelligentsia. For several years, he was a general partner at Andreessen Horowitz, and Andreessen has praised his former business partner: 'Balaji has the highest rate of output per minute of good new ideas of anybody I've met', he wrote.[220] Among other things, Srnivasan has called for 'something like tech Zionism' in San Francisco, a society governed completely by technology. Citizens loyal to the industry's leaders (a 'tech tribe') would form a new political movement, the 'Grays'.[221] In other speeches, Srinivasan has gone even further: 'Grays should embrace the police, okay?. ...That means every policeman's son, daughter, wife, cousin, you know, sibling, whatever, should get a job at a tech company in security'. The Grays, presumably with the help of police, would keep 'Blues'—Srinivasan's label for San Francisco's liberal voters – away from their parts of the city. 'Take total control of your neighborhood. Push out all the Blues. ... Just as Blues ethnically cleanse me out of San Francisco, like, push out all the Blues'.[222]

The journalist Gil Duran has followed the rise of the tech right, or in his words, 'the nerd reich'. In *The New Republic*, he explained why we should take Srinivasan seriously: 'Those who try to downplay Balaji's importance in Silicon Valley often portray him as a clown. But Donald Trump taught us that

clowns can be dangerous, especially those with proximity to influence and power. . .Balaji's politics have become even more stridently authoritarian and extremist, yet he remains a celebrated figure in key circles'. Elon Musk regularly lauds Srinivasan, who has more than one million social media followers on X and is closely connected with Garry Tan, CEO of the start-up accelerator and VC firm Y Combinator, who has 'wage[d] all-out war for political control of San Francisco'.[223]

Building dystopian tomorrows

Another consequence of the tech elites' support for far-right causes is a keen interest in pouring VC funds into military, policing and surveillance tech start-ups developing precisely the kinds of technologies needed to build and maintain a high-tech authoritarian dystopia. This is not an entirely new process – Peter Thiel, Stephen Cohen, Joe Lonsdale, and Alex Karp co-founded the military tech firm Palantir in 2002 and Thiel has been a long-time investor ever since. The company gained notoriety in 2019, when it was revealed that US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents used Palantir's software to help deport immigrant families.[224]

Another military tech firm, Anduril Industries, received early-stage investment from Thiel's VC firm Founders Fund in 2017, and Andreessen Horowitz followed suit two years later. Anduril now has a valuation of more than US$ 30 billion and has secured multi-year, multi-billion dollar Pentagon contracts, including one to build surveillance systems on military bases along the US-Mexico border, enabled by high-resolution cameras mounted on towers and aerial drones.[225]

Even seemingly benign technologies, such as automated license plate readers (LPRs), are becoming crucial components in an emergent authoritarian far-right US. For instance, consider the case of Flock Safety, an Atlanta-based start-up. The firm builds solar-powered AI-enabled LPRs using state-of-the art cameras that store visual data (video and photo images) on cloud servers. Flock was founded in 2017 by engineers who had no experience in law enforcement but had a successful track record in the world of start-ups. They initially marketed their product to local police departments, sheriff's offices, and suburban homeowners' associations, then rapidly expanded into the commercial sector, selling subscriptions to supermarkets and major stores such as The Home Depot and Walmart. A subscription allows users to opt into a reciprocal data-sharing agreement that grants access to data collected by other users. The company claims that more than 6,000 communities have adopted their technology.

Flock capitalised on two trends in policing that began in the 2010s, namely the use of cloud services for storing and processing data, and AI-powered video analytics. But critics warn that Flock, whose product line now also includes aerial drones, is rapidly destroying US citizens' right to privacy. Jay Stanley, an analyst at the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) did not mince his words: 'Flock is building a form of mass surveillance unlike any seen before in American life. . .It has done so through a business model that effectively enlists its customers into a giant centralized government surveillance network', he wrote.[226] The company has built what might be called the perfect panopticon, a tool that enables law-enforcement agencies to create a total nationwide surveillance system that, over time, might potentially deter any kind of suspicious activity by citizens – even constitutionally protected activities such as political protests and demonstrations. Civil rights advocates are understandably concerned that law-enforcement agencies will deploy Flock cameras, like many other algorithmic policing technologies, primarily in Black and Brown communities.

Despite such criticisms, Flock continues to win converts and investors. In its first five years, the company grew at an astonishing pace and by the end of 2021, it became a unicorn – a term that refers to start-ups valued at US$ 1 billion or more. By 2025, after its eighth round of fund-raising, Flock had raised a total of US$ 950 million from more than 20 VC firms and had a US$ 7.5 billion valuation.

Flock's backers include Andreessen Horowitz, which first invested in 2021 and has led several rounds of fund-raising. The firm raved about Flock's future prospects, noting that it was 'well on the way to earning its place as an industry standard in every law enforcement agency. ...[Flock is] effectively the only game in town going after a massive opportunity in shaping the future'.[227] In March 2025, Andreessen Horowitz again led a financing round that brought Flock funding of another US$ 275 million.

What are the consequences of new VC-funded surveillance technologies in an authoritarian US? In recent months, local police departments have collaborated with ICE as its masked, armed agents, often dressed in civilian clothes, detain people suspected of immigration violations. Average immigration-related arrests have more than doubled across much of the country in 2025 compared to a year ago – more than 1,000 arrests each day throughout most of June. In the meantime, Trump has deployed US National Guard troops in Los Angeles, Memphis, Portland, Washington DC ,and Chicago, ostensibly to help defend ICE agents from protesters and to fight crime. Notably, the mayors of all but one of these cities are Black.

In May 2025, the tech journal *404 Media* reported that ICE was using Flock's surveillance data for its mass immigrant deportation programme.[228] Local law-enforcement officers from police departments and sheriff's offices were sharing Flock data with ICE agents – in some cases, illegally. Faced with a public relations nightmare, Flock executives first issued a statement noting that the situation was caused by decisions made in local jurisdictions, then later announced that it would put temporarily halt existing work with federal agencies.

At the time of writing in autumn 2025, after dozens of violent confrontations between ICE agents and protesters in several cities – including San Francisco, a mere 20 km from my home – I cannot help but wonder about the extent to which VC-funded technologies might make the dystopian dreams of far-right and fascist ideologues a reality.[229] If Curtis Yarvin, Balaji Srinivasan and others of their ilk share fantasies about one day creating cities purged of those who would stand in the way of their far-right dreams, it would be difficult to imagine a technology more suitable for supporting these efforts than Flock's LPRs, or Clearview AI's facial recognition software,[230] or Palantir's data integration platform.[231]

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Perhaps it's not surprising that VC firms connected with tech elites such as Andreessen and Thiel, and many others, have helped Flock become the top police tech start-up, or why so many Silicon Valley investment firms are pumping billions into defence and surveillance tech start-ups whose products may soon be unleashed not only in foreign wars, but against people in the US that Trump refers to as 'the enemy within' – namely, immigrants, dissidents and anyone who dares to question his absolute authority.[232]

Andreessen doesn't directly address the external costs of the potentially repressive technologies his company helps to develop, but he often discusses his views in more philosophical ways, in interviews or blog posts. In 2023, he penned 'The Techno-Optimist Manifesto', a quasi-spiritual essay that argues for the unbridled acceleration of technological development and the abolition of

the precautionary principle – the idea that innovations should not be adopted before objectively assessing the harms they might cause. At the end, Andreessen pays homage to 'patron saints of techno-optimism', including Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, the Italian author and Futurist thinker best known for writing *The Futurist Manifesto* (which formed the basis of Mussolini's political platform) and the neo-reactionary philosopher Nick Land, who is often compared with Yarvin and Srinivasan.[233]

Thiel's perspectives are not unlike those articulated by Andreessen. In a 2009 essay he famously argued, 'I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible'. Thiel also noted, 'we are in a deadly race between politics and technology', which for him means that government's heavy hand threatens to hold back innovation and creativity.[234] The essay suggests that anyone who cares about true freedom should support entrepreneurs attempting to explore new 'technological frontiers' such as cyberspace, outer space and 'sea-steading' – the latter of which refers to underwater ocean colonies.

The quest to build an exclusive, members-only utopian society is a trope common to many adherents of the tech right. A surprising number of VC firms have recently provided millions to the start-up Praxis Nation, founded by Dryden Brown. The company seeks to create a free-market city-state to be led by a CEO-type authoritarian figure. In a scathing profile of Brown, the *New York Times* noted that even if Praxis fails, the project 'has pulled together those in the tech world who seek alternatives to liberal democracy, members of an ascendant right that rejects the premise of human equality, and a band of downtown New York scenesters who find it all a bit thrilling'.[235] Different locations have been considered, including the Mediterranean coastlines and Greenland.[236]

According to Rachel Corbett, similar experiments include 'East Solano Plan, run by a real estate corporation that has spent the last seven years buying up $900 million of ranch land in the [San Francisco] Bay Area to build a privatized alternative to San Francisco … and the Free Republic of Liberland, a three-square-mile stretch of unclaimed floodplain between Serbia and Croatia. Many of the same ideologically aligned names – Balaji Srinivasan, Peter Thiel, Marc Andreessen, [Patri] Friedman – recur as financial backers'.[237] We can also include Próspera, a libertarian enclave in Honduras for the super-rich.

Techno-utopian projects of this kind appear to be inspired by the writings of Ayn Rand, particularly her 1957 novel *Atlas Shrugged*.[238] The tech right's delusions would be laughable, were it not for the real prospect of those fantasies leaving a path of destruction and despair for millions of others along the way.

Punching back

Many Silicon Valley elites, with seemingly infinite resources, are now squarely aligned with – and part of – the US far right. When they provide financial backing to start-ups, it is not only to amass more wealth. It's also because many of those firms' products coincide with their future vision of what an ideal authoritarian, post-democratic society should look like.

There's still reason to be optimistic, however. Silicon Valley is not a monolith. Although I've focused here on the tech elites who lean most toward Trump's version of far-right politics, the majority are not driven by ideology, but by opportunism – and fear. Mark Zuckerberg, Sundar Pichai, Sam Altman, Jan Koum (co-founder of WhatsApp) and many others appear to have buckled, and it's likely that when faced with the decision of taking a stand against Trump or throwing their support behind him, they chose the latter. If the Trump Administration continues down its path of militarising US cities,

demonising immigrants, and bullying political opponents, the public outcry may reach a point that at least some of these men will change their tune. The 'Tesla takedown', in which thousands worldwide boycotted Tesla products and staged protests at the company's car dealerships, serves as a model for how citizens and consumers can influence even the most formidable tycoons.[239] When Tesla sales and stock prices dropped, Elon Musk played a diminished role in government, presumably as a result of the activism.

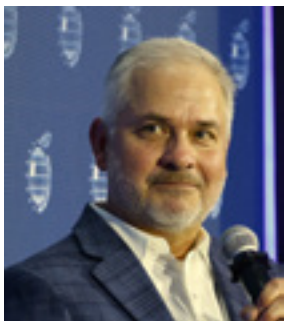
It's also the case that not all tech and VC elites have backed Trump. A handful of powerful Silicon Valley executives have resisted the temptation to flatter or support the president – and some vocally criticised him. Venture capital founders Reid Hoffman, Mike Moritz, Dustin Moskovitz, Mark Cuban and others have continued supporting liberal causes and the Democratic Party, and some have criticised Trump's policies. Not everyone among Silicon Valley's power elite has become a sycophant.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Silicon Valley is much more than the sum of its tech and VC elites. It was built and is sustained by hundreds of thousands of tech workers who vote for liberal and progressive causes by large margins. Seven out of ten tech workers in the region did not vote for Trump in 2024, and many are disaffected by the right-wing shift of many of their company's leaders and policies.[240] Some have protested,[241] including former workers at Palantir, which has received contracts with military and intelligence agencies for more than 20 years.[242] Millions of other US citizens are involved in the difficult task of organising themselves against the menacing threat of far-right politics – or worse yet, a fascist future.

It's up to the rest of us to punch back – while there's still time.

BIO

Roberto J. González is a professor of anthropology at San José State University, his academic home since 2001. His areas of expertise are science, technology, and culture; militarisation in US society; anthropological ethics; and environmental anthropology. You can reach him at roberto.gonzalez@sjsu.edu.



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WEAPONISING GENDER: How gender became the perfect scapegoat for far-right and authoritarian actors

Aminah Jasho, Esme Abbott, Julisa Tambunan

Anti-gender politics has become integral to the far-right organising globally, because it offers offer emotionally charged justifications for centralising power and suppressing civil society. Behind it lies a powerful network of religious fundamentalists, right-wing thinktanks, reactionary politicians and elites.

Anti-gender mobilisation has become a defining feature of far-right movements since around 2015; and is now a tactic widely adopted by authoritarian governments across the political spectrum. From overturning abortion rights in the United States (US) to rescinding protection against domestic violence in Türkiye, institutions that defend women's rights are being systematically dismantled. These patterns align with a global decline in democracy, with over 75% of the world's population now living under restricted freedom.[243] The correlation is not coincidental. As democratic institutions weaken, attacks on gender-based rights accelerate the decline and provide a roadmap for it.

Understanding this dynamic requires distinguishing between authoritarianism, a political mode that concentrates power and erodes democratic checks; and the far-right, defined by ultranationalism, rigid social hierarchies, and the belief that progressive values threaten civilisation. The two increasingly converge through shared anti-gender politics. Although anti-gender ideology is rooted in far-right worldviews, its tactics are attractive to authoritarian leaders of varying orientations because they offer emotionally charged justifications for centralising power and suppressing civil society.

For the far-right, patriarchal control is foundational. Fascist and ultranationalist movements have long treated the heteronormative family as a microcosm of the hierarchical society they seek to build. Women's reproductive role, the policing of sexuality, and the ideal of demographic renewal are not peripheral policies but core ideological commitments. Yet the political convenience of anti-gender positions extend beyond this. For authoritarian leaders and other opportunistic actors, 'gender ideology' functions as an empty signifier[244]: a deliberately ambiguous term into which diverse groups can pour their grievances while mobilising around a shared enemy.

This dual nature – an ideological bedrock for some, opportunistic tool for others – helps explains the power of the backlash. Framing gender justice as a threat to 'tradition' simultaneously mobilises far-right constituencies, supplies authoritarian leaders with a convenient wedge issue, and legitimises the dismantling of institutional checks and the protection of minorities. Once it becomes possible to restrict the rights of women and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer and other non-binary (LGBTQ+) people in the name of protecting families or children, the precedent is set for targeting any group that challenges authority.

This dynamic has enabled an unusually broad coalition. Religious fundamentalists provide moral legitimacy, mobilising believers through claims of divine order and their transnational networks. Far-right populists and authoritarian leaders weaponise the language of tradition to portray themselves as defenders of 'ordinary people' while using state power to erode rights. Gender-critical activists[245] offer insider credibility, laundering extreme positions through the language of women's safety. At the cultural level, social media influencers romanticise women's domestic submission, while the online manosphere radicalises young men via viral misogyny and unfounded conspiracies. Underpinning these currents are billionaire funders and oligarchs who channel resources into think tanks, legal campaigns, and media ecosystems, transforming moral panic into concrete policy outcomes.

These narratives resonate because they redirect public anxieties during a period of overlapping crises, from economic precarity to declining political trust, towards convenient scapegoats. Rising inequality has created fertile ground for reactionary thinking, and demagogues both capitalise on these sentiments and actively cultivate them.[246] Rather than confronting capitalism and democratic decay, they channel public frustration into moral panic, casting women, LGBTQ+ people, and the activists who defend them, as the source of social breakdown. The result is a systematic assault on the foundations of an open society, with women's rights serving both as the initial target and the testing ground for broader authoritarian strategies.

This essay maps the contemporary anti-gender playbook: who is using it, the myths they deploy, and the tactics that move it from meme to ministry. It also traces the consequences for democracy and examines how feminist movements are building counterpower to resist its advance.

The Myths and The Machine

Across disparate political movements, three core myths have emerged, casting gender justice as a danger to the traditional family, the innocent child, and to ethnonationalism. These narratives overlap and reinforce each other, giving different actors a common vocabulary of fear without any need for coordination.

The Natural Family

A common myth across all anti-gender movements is that the nuclear family is the foundation of civilisation and is under systematic attack from feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and progressive reforms.

Religious fundamentalists provide the ideological foundation for this myth, framing heterosexual, cisgender, nuclear families as the only 'natural' family structure. In the 1990s, the Vatican and conservative evangelical groups began advancing the spectre of '*gender ideology*', the term used to describe ideas that separate gender from biological sex, challenge the 'natural' complementarity of men and women, and undermine a God-ordained family structure. Anti-trans and gender-binary arguments flow from this because they insist that 'real men and women' are fixed, binary, and essential for reproducing the natural family. Today, transnational networks like the World Congress of Families and their digital campaign allies such as CitizenGo coordinate messages from Eastern Europe to countries across the African continent: pumping money into Romania's 2018 referendum[247] to ban same-sex marriage and lobbying for harsh anti-LGBTQ laws in Ghana, Nigeria, Kenya, and Uganda.[248]

Populist 'strongmen' exploit the myth of the 'family under siege' to justify authoritarian measures as the defence of tradition. Leaders such as Hungary's Viktor Orbán promote pro-natalist, 'family-first' policies, weaponising social security by rewarding heterosexual married couples for having children.[249] Yet he bans gender studies, undermines educational freedom, and stops funding women's shelters, thus increasing women's economic dependence on men and the home, all under the guise of protecting tradition.

In Kenya, for example, a rising campaign against gender and sexual minority rights has been framed as defending 'African values' and protecting children, even as it follows a script written by US evangelical organisations such as Family Watch International and the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ), both active across East Africa. During the 2025 Pan-African Conference on Family Values, Kenyan officials and ultra-conservatives decried 'gender ideology' and sexual rights as an assault on African culture.[250]

This 'natural gender hierarchy' is promoted and amplified online. On social media *tradwife* influencers romanticise ultra-traditional gender roles such as submission, domesticity, and motherhood as aspirational lifestyles, aestheticising conservative ideology using the imagery of care and femininity. They tap into people's frustrations with capitalism; the overwork, isolation, and devaluation of care by retreating into dependency on men and framing patriarchy as the illusion of stability, while leaving the economic and gender inequalities that produced the crisis untouched.[251]

Meanwhile, the *manosphere* tells disaffected young men that feminists and 'modern women' are to blame for their problems. Male influencers, sometimes called 'alpha males' or 'red-pilled' gurus, offer a steady diet of misogyny and conspiracy theories, from rants about women being intrinsically manipulative to claims that society oppresses men and favours women.ix They prey on economic anxieties (unemployment, frustrations about being unable to find a long-term partner) and redirect this anger towards feminism as the villain, encouraging a return to male dominance as the answer.

The manosphere and 'tradwives' reinforce the same political goal: retraining citizens in patriarchal hierarchy. As the seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes argued, people must be conditioned to accept unquestioning authority through the paterfamilias – the father as absolute head of the household. This extends to democratic participation itself – echoing sentiments like those recently amplified by Trump's Defence Secretary Pete Hegseth, where pastors argue that votes should be made by fathers for their household, further silencing women and eroding democratic values.[252]

The Innocent Children

Building on the narrative of the natural family, anti-gender movements whip up moral panic by portraying children as being under constant threat. Few myths are more emotionally resonant: after all, who would oppose protecting children? This narrative claims that only traditional patriarchal families can properly safeguard children from external corruption, making the family structure a matter of child survival. Religious and populist movements have strategically and deliberately elevated parenthood as a political identity and the child as a sacred figure around which coalitions can be built. While this framing also fuels racialised panics, such as recent attacks on migrants in the United Kingdom (UK) under the banner of 'protecting children', here it functions to recast women's reproductive rights as a battle over children's safety. Access to contraception and abortion gets framed not as health care or autonomy, but as selfish women 'killing babies' or betraying motherhood.[253] Anti-abortion campaigns frequently deploy images of infant faces and hearts, implying that women who do not wish to or might be advised against, or are unable to carry a pregnancy to term are cruelly choosing their career or convenience over a child's life. In this way, women's bodily autonomy is painted as a form of callousness towards innocent life.

The flipside is that forced childbirth is promoted as 'rescuing' the unborn child – regardless of the cost to the real, living woman. In countries from the US to Poland to El Salvador, where abortion laws are among the most restrictive, proponents explicitly invoke 'saving children' to justify banning abortion, even when this threatens women's lives.[254]

Psychoanalysts such as Erica Komisar popularise a more subtle version of this myth, arguing that mothers who return to work too soon after giving birth harm their children's mental health.[255] By cloaking traditional gender roles in the language of psychology and child development, such narratives guilt-trip women for seeking autonomy and blame feminism for family breakdown.

Once the narrative of endangered children is established, it can expand in multiple directions. Autocrats have revived the archaic homophobic conflation of homosexuality with paedophilia, systematically painting LGBTQ+ people as inherent threats to children. Hungary's government made adoption illegal for same-sex couples and effectively outlawed trans people from legally changing gender, claiming these measures keep children safe. Poland's government deployed a propaganda film splicing a child's cry for help directly after footage of Warsaw's mayor signing the LGBT+ Charter. The implicit message was that queer rights are a direct danger to children. We see similar tactics elsewhere: sex education in schools is labelled as 'grooming' or 'sexualisation' of children; inclusive children's books are denounced as pornography and banned, transforming abstract policy debates into visceral parental concerns.

The Great Replacement and Its Global Mirrors

Another persistent myth circulating in far-right discourse is the claim that white populations are being systematically replaced through declining birth rates and immigration. While it is true that birth rates are declining in almost every country,[256] this shift is not itself a crisis. It reflects multiple factors, including the increase of women's bodily autonomy, as well the conditions that shape people's decisions about having children, such as economic precarity, inadequate care systems, and climate breakdown. Rather than confronting the structural causes, far-right movements misattribute falling birth rates to feminism, LGBTQ+ rights, and (non-white) immigration, reframing demographic change as evidence of social 'decay' or even a coordinated plot to destroy white civilisation. Within the digital ecosystem, the manosphere amplifies these conspiracies, feeding racialised and gendered fears and, in their most extreme forms, inciting violence in the name of 'defending' national or cultural purity.

This conspiracy has become a strategic link between anti-gender politics and white nationalist agendas, revealing how attacking women's rights functions as a gateway to attacking other minorities. Governments and populist or authoritarian leaders have contributed to its mainstreaming. In Italy, for example, politicians such as Matteo Salvini deploy replacement rhetoric to justify anti-migration agendas and to discredit feminist movements. During the 'Unite the Kingdom' rally in September 2025, a mobilisation of hundreds of thousands of far-right supporters, Tommy Robinson (whose real name is Stephen Yaxley-Lennon) and his allies frequently used language about 'losing' Britain (essentially England), being 'taken over' or 'changed' in ways that are irreversible. The adaptability of this narrative heightens its policy relevance.

Paradoxically, this narrative also operates in reverse in Global South countries, while keeping 'replacement' logic at its centre. As we saw in the example of Kenya, feminism is recast as Western or a white ideological project that threatens 'African values', and a similar narrative is used in countries across the North Africa and Middle East (MENA) region, such as Algeria and Egypt, as well as in religious nationalist movements like Hindutva in India.

The money behind the machine

How did these narratives and the concrete changes in policies become so prevalent worldwide? Hidden behind them is a sophisticated yet shadowy funding infrastructure, transforming the narratives from fringe ideas into mainstream policy. In the US, conservative foundations began building this apparatus in the 1970s and 1980s, but the effort intensified dramatically in the 2000s, both in response to United Nations declarations advancing gender equality and as part of broader far-right mobilisation following Obama's election. The infrastructure spans from universities to courtrooms, creating what amounts to an ideological assembly line. In the US, networks like the Koch foundation, Heritage Foundation, and Federalist Society have systematically captured institutions

through decades of strategic funding.[257] The majority of federal judges appointed by President Trump are products of the Federalist Society, including six Supreme Court justices who overturned Roe v. Wade.[258] These networks fund law schools, groom conservative legal scholars, and create the intellectual scaffolding that makes reversing rights seem legally sound rather than ideologically motivated. The Alliance for Defending Freedom – a US-based conservative Christian legal group instrumental in the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* – set up a UK branch in 2015, where its expenditure surged by 187% between 2019 and 2023 (to £3.9 million).[259]

Outside the US, the anti-gender ecosystem is bankrolled by a mix of religious networks, far-right oligarch philanthropy, and even mainstream corporate and government budgets. In Latin America, for example, core streams include the Catholic Church, private wealth and companies such as Mexico's Grupo Bimbo, and spending through ministries of health or education, while significant European funders also resource campaigns across the region. Spain's HaxteOir/CitizenGo has become a global petition and mobilisation hub with its Africa office based in Nairobi. The Brazilian-founded Tradition, Family and Property (*Tradição, Família, Propriedade*) operates an international network of groups advancing ultra-conservative family and property doctrines. Russian donors aligning with the Orthodox Church, such as the oligarchs Vladimir Yakunin and Konstantin Malofeev, financed transnational advocacy against gender justice. In the Gulf, the Qatari government funds the Doha International Family Institute, part of a broader pattern of Organisation of Islamic Cooperation that linked investments in 'pro-family' research and lobbying. Overall, the global revenue reached an estimated , channelled to countries across Africa, Asia-Pacific, Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean, highlighting how non-US donors and venues are equally central and deeply embedded in the global infrastructure.[260]

From Myths to Mobilisation

When anti-gender actors gain government influence, they systematically dismantle human rights infrastructure. Agencies and laws to protect women's and minority rights are defunded, rebranded, or abolished. Domestic violence initiatives are reframed as 'anti-family' and defunded on the grounds that they promote divorce. Brazil's former president, Jair Bolsonaro, closed the national women's ministry and LGBTQ+ councils as part of his crusade against 'gender ideology.'[261] The goal is clear – remove gender from the policy agenda by erasing the machinery that enforces it and eliminate spaces that empower women or question patriarchy.

Simultaneously, other actors co-opt the language of rights to legitimise exclusionary agendas. Sweden's far-right deploys 'femonationalism',[262] using gender equality rhetoric to attack immigration, claiming to protect white women from dangerous immigrant men.[263] France invokes feminism to oppose Islamic dress.[264] Groups identifying as *gender-critical* or *TERF* (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) increasingly distance themselves from the feminist language of women's liberation altogether. Instead, they frame their positions through vocabularies of 'rights' and 'protection' – claiming to defend 'women's rights,' 'free speech,' or 'child safety'. This rhetorical shift mirrors the far-right and religious fundamentalist tactics of invoking protection to justify oppression. By appropriating the moral and legal language of human rights, these actors blur the boundaries between liberation and restriction. What sounds like the defence of rights becomes, in practice, the defence of hierarchy – a linguistic sleight of hand allowing authoritarian politics to masquerade as common sense.

Educational materials face heavy monitoring, with books being rewritten or banned if they acknowledge transgender people or historical sexism. Gender, race and sexuality studies, as well as comprehensive sex education, are being banned from primary schools to universities. The strategy

is twofold: suppress knowledge that challenges patriarchal and majoritarian narratives and send a chilling message that even discussing gender or sexual diversity is unacceptable and dangerous. This is a direct assault on intellectual freedom, inclusive education and pluralism, the key pillars of any democracy.[265]

Perhaps the most rapidly evolving tactic is the use of digital platforms and information warfare. Far-right actors exploit social media algorithms that amplify the most extreme, polarising material, creating radicalisation pipelines whereby users progress from seemingly harmless memes to hardcore misogynist beliefs. The manosphere churns out viral content attacking 'feminazis' and glorifying male dominance, while disinformation campaigns conflate sex education with pornography and homosexuality with paedophilia to stoke moral panic.[266] What begins as memes framed as jokes or edgy contrarianism quickly becomes a channel to harder ideology.[267]

Particularly vicious is the use of deepfakes and AI-generated sexual imagery to silence women and gender-diverse activists, especially those engaged in critique of powerful actors. One in six US congresswomen and over 30 female politicians in the UK have faced AI-generated sexual imagery designed to humiliate and silence them;[268] 73% of women journalists worldwide experience online violence, with women of colour facing the worst abuse.[269] An Amnesty International 'Troll Patrol' study found that female public figures received over one million abusive tweets in a single year – roughly one every 30 seconds.[270] Many of these attacks are highly coordinated, suggesting the involvement of organised 'troll farms' often aligned with extremist or state interests. These attacks do not harm only the individual victims (and their families) but create a broader 'chilling effect', undermining democracy by intimidating half the population into withdrawing from public debate.

These digital tactics – algorithmic radicalisation, disinformation, harassment, and deepfakes – are not random but part of a broader authoritarian strategy: to bypass democratic deliberation and rule through fear and confusion. By 'flooding the zone' with emotionally charged falsehoods, they ensure that public discourse revolves around invented threats (e.g. 'Save our kids from gay paedophiles!') rather than real policy issues. By targeting and terrorising dissenters, they drastically narrow whose voices are heard, creating skewed 'common sense' where many citizens genuinely believe that legislation on domestic violence is anti-family or that feminism has made men the real victims. Once hate and misinformation are normalised, it becomes easier for authoritarians to take the next concrete steps, which are indeed their objectives: passing laws that majorities might otherwise question, and dismantling checks and balances that seem abstract compared to the fiery cultural battles consuming public attention.

The Toll of Anti-Gender Politics

The repercussions of this coordinated backlash are felt intimately in people's lives and broadly in political systems. One of the clearest effects of the attack on gender has been the constriction of who participates in politics and civic life. Numerous women politicians around the world have resigned or retired early citing unbearable levels of harassment, including Finland's former prime minister, Sanna Marin. Outspoken women journalists like Michelle Mendoza from Guatemala and Rana Ayyub from India have retreated from social media or investigative reporting after rape threats against them or their families. In some places, female activists must operate anonymously or risk arrest under religious morality laws.

When more than half the population is silenced or side-lined, driven out through online abuse, legal barriers, or physical threats, decision-making spaces lose not only those individuals but also

the perspectives and priorities they represent, and democracy itself is weakened. Parliaments and councils become less representative. Policies that might have addressed women's needs or rights are never considered, because fewer advocates remain at the table. The result is a thinner democracy, a system with fewer people heard, fewer rights secured, and fewer limits on those in power.

Rolling back protections correlates with increases in gender-based violence and attacks on the rights of marginalised groups. Indeed, countries that have tightened abortion restrictions or weakened domestic violence laws often see spikes in femicides and assaults, as reported in Indonesia by the *Indonesia Femicide Watch*.[271] LGBTQ+ people, when stigmatised by law, face surging hate crimes – such as recent horrific attacks on queer spaces in Kenya, Nigeria and Uganda. When leaders signal that women's rights are not a priority (or suggest that domestic abuse is not a crime), it emboldens abusive behaviour at home and in the streets.

Health systems suffer too. Restrictions on access to reliable contraception combined with abortion bans drive higher maternal mortality and trauma. Women with pregnancy complications may delay seeking care for fear of the legal consequences, sometimes dying as a result (as has happened in Poland,[272] El Salvador,[273] Ireland, and some [274]). HIV prevention and treatment programmes have been disrupted – clinics serving gay men have been raided or shut, outreach workers arrested, and trust between providers and patients destroyed. Even where medical care is still available, trans people avoid seeking it for fear of mistreatment or being outed.

At the same time, as civic space shrinks, it becomes harder for communities to respond to these challenges. If an authoritarian government won't address a rise in domestic violence, normally non-government organisations (NGOs) or grassroots groups would step in with hotlines, shelters, and awareness campaigns. But if those organisations are defunded or criminalised (accused of 'promoting divorce' or 'spreading Western ideas'), then there's no one left to tackle the problem. In open societies, women's organisations and local governments expanded services and ran public messaging to help. In more repressive settings, activists struggle to even get permission to keep shelters open, and some have been arrested for violating public-order rules when they tried to protest against femicides.

Societies grow harsher and more divided under these conditions. Trust between groups declines because the authoritarian narrative thrives on pitting 'us' against 'them'. And so social cohesion frays, making it even easier for authoritarians to push the notion that only a strong hand (theirs) can maintain order.

The impact on the lives and bodies of women and girls is immediate and intimate. Traditionalist policies and cultural pressure channel women back into unpaid care roles, undermining their economic independence and reducing household incomes. Pronatalist incentives and restrictions on reproductive autonomy strip away choice, binding women's futures to demographic or political agendas rather than personal aspirations. Violence and harassment, both online and offline, exacerbate these constraints, silencing voices and constricting possibilities. LGBTQ+ communities face exclusion from jobs, education, and health care, which in turn produces poverty, marginalisation, and heightened vulnerability to abuse.

The Counterpower: Feminist Resistance

The backlash is global, but so is the counter-mobilisation. Operating under severe constraints, from chronic underfunding, legal harassment, to blatant violence, feminist movements continue to defend and expand freedoms. They are not only resisting but also adapting and innovating. Understanding this resistance is crucial as it offers a blueprint for countering far-right actors and authoritarianism. In coalition with other social justice movements, feminist actors show what it takes to confront an existential threat to open society and human rights.

Equal Measures 2030 (EM2030) has tracked how democratic backsliding and setbacks to gender equality reinforce each other: 44 countries have stagnated or regressed.[275] The direct attacks on feminist movements are real. Over 70% of United Nations Trust Fund grantees reported experiencing a backlash in 2024, ranging from systemic obstruction (budget cuts, policy freezes) to denial and distortion (token reforms, misinformation) and outright repression (evictions, criminalisation, cyber-attacks).[276] In Bangladesh, groups that led the creation 2010 Domestic Violence Act faced shrinking civic space and were forced into safer service roles, while Nicaraguan feminists continue advocacy and care work in exile after mass crackdowns on activists and organisations.[277] In Zimbabwe, years of repressive laws and volatile funding have fragmented what was once a strong women's movement.

Far-right attacks are persistent and well-resourced. This is in stark contrast to the scarcity of resources for feminist resistance: only 3.9% of Official Development Assistance (ODA) has gender equality as a principal objective, and just 0.2% goes directly to feminist movements. Combined with shrinking civic space, sustained resistance can seem nearly impossible. Yet, as history has proven, feminist movements persist. Grassroots groups, lawyers, health workers, students, unions, and survivor-led networks build a repertoire blending lawfare, mass mobilisation, mutual aid, and transnational coordination. This is anchored in evidence because data and stories drive policy traction. These forces demonstrate that even under repression, feminist movements keep innovating strategies to safeguard not only rights but open society itself.

Legal and Judicial Resistance

The far-right's greatest success is in building permanent institutions beyond election cycles. Pro-democracy and feminist movements have begun to adopt similar long-term thinking. Legal advocacy has produced some of the most durable countermeasures. In Latin America, a region facing a strong backlash from religious conservatives, feminist litigation has fuelled landmark court rulings: a strategic lawsuit by coalition led to Colombia's Constitutional Court decriminalising first-trimester abortion in 2022,[278] citing women's rights and equality; Mexico's Supreme Court followed in 2023, striking down all criminal penalties for abortion. These victories expanded rights and set precedents inspiring activists elsewhere (the so-called 'Green Wave' for abortion rights across Latin America).

In France, women's rights groups successfully pushed for a constitutional amendment in 2024 to enshrine the right to abortion and safeguard this against future far-right governments. In Indonesia, women's legal aid organisations played a crucial role in drafting and passing the Sexual Violence Crimes Law in 2022;[279] and now focus on training police and assisting survivors to ensure the law is implemented, effectively using the system to force reluctant authorities to act.

EM2030 case studies show that when movements are resourced, they build systems that outlast election cycles:[280] In Canada, feminist coalitions secured a 10-year National Action Plan on Gender-based Violence (GBV) and the first national survey of trans and gender-diverse people, ensuring

evidence-backed budgets. Traditional leaders in Malawi allied with girls' rights groups to annul 3,500 child marriages and align the Constitution to set 18 as the legal minimum. Activists in Nepal managed to push women's quotas to over 40% in local elections, and in Uruguay, the National Integrated Care System reframes care as a right and has expanded access, thanks to years of feminist coalition-building.

These legal efforts, while slow, technical, and under-recognised, create durable change. They outlast a given administration and affirm that women and men are equal citizens and that violence is unacceptable, influencing social norms over time.

Protest and mobilisation

The tradition of feminist street protest remains strong. For example, Spain's 8M marches continue to tie reproductive justice, care, and labour equality together. In Kenya, the largest anti-femicide protests in the country's history forced femicide onto the national agenda, despite violent police crackdowns. In Türkiye, the We Will Stop Femicides Platform documents killings and continues its protests despite government withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention, detentions, and a looming closure case. And in Argentina, Ni Una Menos (Not One (Woman) Less) redefined the discourse on violence, forcing femicide and state accountability into the mainstream, even as the Milei government dismantles gender institutions.

Where authoritarianism closes civic space, resistance adapts. After the Taliban banned girls' education and women's work, Afghan women ran underground schools and online classes. Despite new surveillance and penalties for unveiled women, Iranian women and girls persist in 'Woman, Life, Freedom' defiance. Ugandan feminists and queer activists document and challenge the sweeping 2023 Anti-Homosexuality Act, even as it raises the risks of public organising.

These protests visibly manifest public support for equality. They inspire people, draw in the unconverted, and make it harder for leaders to pretend that opposition is just a few 'NGO feminists'.

Direct service provision

When states abandon services, feminist groups step in, providing care and building forms of mutual aid that function as political resistance. The US, since the overturn of *Roe v. Wade,* exemplifies this: with abortion banned or severely restricted in many states, a network of abortion funds and practical support groups expanded overnight to secure access through travel and medication sent by mail. They raised millions through grassroots donations, set up hotlines, and coordinated volunteer drivers and hosts across state lines. By 2023, medication-induced abortions accounted for 63% of all US abortions, much of it enabled by these networks quietly working around new laws.

In Poland, cross-border pill-sharing networks and hotlines run by Abortion Without Borders keep care accessible under a near-total ban. Feminist groups also keep domestic violence shelters and rape crisis centres open when governments defund them. In many countries, the only services for survivors are run by women's NGOs. In parts of sub-Saharan Africa or South Asia, feminist NGOs operate the only hotline or shelter in an entire region, scraping by on foreign grants or donations, especially when governments either do not allocate funds or actively cut them. This kind of work does not make the international headlines, but it is lifesaving and community-building. It quietly builds a constituency – every woman who gets help becomes a potential supporter for the cause, even if silently. Some feminist scholars call *'the resilience of the infrastructure of dissent'*.

Transnational Solidarity

While authoritarian leaders and far-right movements promote nationalism and isolationism, feminists leverage international connections to outflank them. As the anti-gender groups coordinate globally, the resistance does too, albeit with far less money.

Some of the starkest resistance come from cross-border organising. In The Gambia, coalitions of survivors and rights groups successfully defeated a 2024 parliamentary attempt to repeal the national ban on female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C).[281] In neighbouring Sierra Leone, activists and survivors took their case to the ECOWAS Court, which in July 2025 ordered the government to criminalise FGM, declaring it a form of torture. These regional rulings show how feminist actors use transnational forums and solidarity networks to block or reverse regression. ODI Global's research shows that transnational civic space and support from diaspora activists enable women's voices to be heard despite domestic constraints.[282]

These examples show that just as authoritarian and far-right actors build coalitions to erode rights, feminist movements build alliances to defend gains, support those being harmed, and resist backsliding. The intensity of anti-gender mobilisation is itself evidence of progress: patriarchal and far-right actors push harder when feminist ideas have taken root, and real political change has begun.

Feminist movements recognise that authoritarianism and fascism do not falter through symbolic representation or superficial inclusion, but through sustained struggles for justice, material security, and equality. Far-right ideas thrive on division, scapegoating, and manufactured fear – they weaken when people have rights, protections, and the social conditions that make solidarity possible. If the rights of one group can be dismantled, all are at risk. Resisting this therefore requires strengthening the political, social, and economic foundations that allow every group, every woman, to live with dignity and without fear. Feminist resistance that is diverse, intersectional, and grounded in care and justice, offers a clear path to confronting far-right movements.

BIOS

Julisa Tambunan (she/they) is the Deputy Executive Director and Head of Partnerships and Learning at Equal Measures 2030, a global feminist coalition advancing gender equality through the power of data. For nearly two decades, she has worked across the Majority World alongside marginalized communities, holding power to account through journalism, humanitarian response, feminist organizing and movement building.

Aminah Jasho (she/her) is the Head of Strategic Communications at Equal Measures 2030 and the founder of Unmothering the Woman, a feminist storytelling platform reimagining motherhood, care, and reproductive justice. For over 15 years, Aminah has led transformative communications across movements, coalitions, and campaigns, working at the intersection of gender justice, narrative change, and data-driven advocacy.

Esme Abbott (she/her) is the Communications Lead at Equal Measures supporting the development and implementation of communications and advocacy strategies for EM2030. She has experience supporting youth-focused organisations and using data-driven advocacy to advance gender equality and the Sustainable Development Goals. Esme is also the Co- Founder of Postcolonial Encounters, an awareness-raising project aimed at dismantling colonial structures in our global systems.

‘FOR SOME OF US, IT WAS ALWAYS LIKE THIS’: Anti-migrant politics as a fascist touchstone

Alyna Smith

Europe's anti-migrant politics has a long history – and while obscured by technocratic language – has built a border-industrial complex and political elite consensus behind ever more brutal forms of border fascism.

I was a pre-schooler when my family moved to Canada from Jamaica. Initially, we lived in Toronto, the country's largest city, before moving to Chatham, a mid-sized city about 300 kilometres away in Southwestern Ontario.

Chatham was a sleepy town. Manufacturing was a dominant industry, but you didn't have to drive long before finding yourself in fields. Today, just 2% of Chatham's population is black, but before the abolition of slavery it was the northernmost point of the Underground Railroad and in the 1950s was considered the 'Black Mecca' of Canada, with black people making up a third of its population. Indigenous communities live in nearby Moraviantown and Bkejwanong, also known as Walpole Island.

One afternoon at break, I was sitting by the trees at the extremity of the playground when I saw a man approach from the other side of the fence. 'You're Jamaican', he said, in a familiar accent. I nodded and he smiled before turning and walking away. I learned later from my parents that he was probably a seasonal labourer at one of the nearby farms.

That moment by the fence came back to me when reading Donald Trump's words in August 2025, talking, in the midst of a nation-wide immigration crack-down, about the needs of US agribusiness: 'We can't let our farmers not have anybody'. Referring to migrant farm workers, he continued:

> 'These people do it naturally, naturally. I said, what happens if they get a bad back? He said, they don't get a bad back, sir, because if they get a bad back, they die'.

Like the US and Canada, Jamaica is a child of settler colonialism. Then as now, disposable labour was essential to the project of prosperity for a few. Britain's plantocracy was sustained through violence and the exploitation of hundreds of thousands of enslaved Africans, *'exclud[ing] the kidnapped agricultural populations of Africa from its conception of what it was to be human'.*[283] Today, our globalised economic system requires an underclass of disposable – often deportable – workers, and an ever-expanding security apparatus to discipline them.

In other words, for some, there is little new in the racialised brutalities of our contemporary economic order. Nearly a century ago, the *exploitable worker* of Mussolini's Italy was the 'foreign' person who moved from the country's impoverished rural south to its urban north.[284] Fascism has taught us how dehumanisation is not only essential to sustaining an economic status quo, but also a powerful tool for mobilising political power.

Today, I live in Brussels, the seat of the European Union (EU). Like liberal democracies around the world, anti-migrant politics here are a touchstone of neofascists and the far right; they are also business as usual for the political establishment. In this essay, I will argue that Europe's anti-migrant politics, often masked in technocratic policy-speak, expresses *multiple elements of fascist politics*, or fascist tactics to build and sustain political and economic power. These include systematic efforts to solidify distinctions between 'us' and 'them' based on ethnic, religious, or racial distinctions; pervasive victimhood conveyed through the incessant language of threat; rising militarism in response to the supposed threat; and concentrations and collaborations of state and corporate power nourished and extended by all of the above.

The embers of fascism in the US and Europe

Jason Stanley, in *How Fascism Works*, reminds us that Charles Lindbergh, aviator, military author, and US citizen, opposed his country's involvement in World War II, arguing for the need to build a white nation and 'guard against becom[ing] engulfed in a limitless foreign sea'. Stanley writes:

> 'The America First movement was the public face of pro-fascist sentiment in the United States at the time. In the twenties and thirties, many Americans shared Lindbergh's views against immigration, especially by non-Europeans. The Immigration Act of 1924 strictly limited immigration into the country, and it was specifically intended to restrict immigration both nonwhites and Jews.'[285]

Stanley's book is concerned with fascist politics, understood as fascist tactics used to achieve power. He identifies multiple such tactics, which generally align with variously described features of classic fascist movements and regimes,[286] including return to a mythic past; a strong emphasis on nationalism; propaganda; militarism and imperialist aspirations; demonisation of perceived enemies, often in ethnic terms; a sense of victimisation; authoritarianism and a hierarchical order; and the rejection of democratic institutions.[287] Central, however, in his account 'is the very specific way that fascist politics distinguishes "us" from "them," appealing to ethnic, religious, or racial distinctions, and using this division to shape ideology and, ultimately, policy. Every mechanism of fascist politics works to create or solidify this distinction'[288] – a distinction that is a central feature of anti-migrant politics.

The embers of fascism continue to burn in European politics today: in France's National Rally, which now has 126 seats in the French parliament; in Italy's ruling Brothers of Italy Party, descended from the neofascist Italian Social Movement; and in the Freedom Party of Austria (FPÖ), the largest of five parties in Austria's lower parliament, founded in 1956 and whose first leader was a former Nazi bureaucratic and SS officer. At the time of writing, far-right parties head or are junior members of coalition governments in nine EU member states, with the Sweden Democrats supporting the country's minority government since 2022; and hold a quarter of the seats in the European Parliament, following their surge in the 2024 elections.[289] Each of these parties has exploited anti-migrant vitriol in its rise.

In France, the National Rally (formerly the National Front, or NF) has played a crucial role in the country's history of the far right since its founding in 1972 by a group of influential political activists on the French extreme right, including Jean-Marie Le Pen, father of its current leader. Like extreme right-wing parties elsewhere in Europe, the NF has succeeded in driving a rightward shift in French politics, particularly on the issue of immigration. Chris Millington, in *A History of Fascism in France*, writes about the FN's electoral breakthrough in 1986:

> '[I]t was the FN's stance on immigration that trumped all other matters for both the party's supporters and its opponents. The issue assumed central importance in the FN's 1986 parliamentary election manifesto. Under the influence of GRECE [*Groupe de Recherche et d'Etude pour la Civilisation Européene*] thinking on the subject, the party's strategy aimed to ostracize the immigrant in political, cultural and economic, rather than racial, terms. FN candidates blamed foreigners for a growing sense of *insécurité,* a nebulous term that came to encompass concerns over crime, drugs, gang warfare, urban violence, civil disorder and the threat of civil war. The focus of FN rhetoric shifted from skin colour to matters of historical and cultural difference.'[290]

Jean-Marie Le Pen publicly rejected racism and, shrewdly, called on his followers to avoid inflammatory language in favour of more 'technical' terms – for instance, demanding the 'repatriation of Third World immigrants' and not that they be 'dump[ed] in the sea'.[291] That year, the NF won 2.7 million votes in the parliamentary elections, sending 35 deputies to the National Assembly. Mainstream political parties took note of the FN's success in exploiting immigration as a political issue and increasingly emphasised immigration and *insécurité* in their language and platforms. When Marine Le Pen took over the party leadership in 2010, she sought to detoxify its image, especially on economic issues – but retained its campaign against immigration.

Technocratic Fascism

Today's European political establishment has fully integrated a deeply anti-immigration – and anti-migrant – politics, with 'security' as a touchstone issue. This form of technocratic fascism is characterised by 'a series of constrained "quick fixes" of a militarised, exceptional and managerial character'.[292] In defining its programme and priorities, it relies on the 'expertise' of the same commercial interests keen to shape and benefit from the expansion of state violence. While less prone to directly scapegoating migrants than their colleagues on the extreme right, mainstream parties do not challenge the neofascists' racism and xenophobia, and have adopted the same calls for 'border security'. They've done so not only to seize ground from the far right, but because they also accept the basic premise that defending borders is needed to sustain and reinforce the economic status quo.

In Brussels, the EU's implementation of a historically hostile and notoriously deadly immigration politics has been led by centrists. The current president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, who began her second five-year mandate in 2025, is a member of Germany's CDU, which is part of centre-right European People's Party (EPP) political group in the European Parliament. Its manifesto in the last elections emphasised the EPP's belief in a 'European way of life', defined by freedom and security, and a 'strong Europe' that 'protects its borders and tackles illegal [sic] migration'.[293]

Reflecting increased pressure from its member states, the past decade has seen a steady churn of EU legislation on migration, progressively restricting rights for migrants and expanding the apparatus of deterrence and brutality.[294] 2024 and 2025 were particularly productive. May 2024 saw the passage of the Pact on Asylum and Migration, a legislative package that extends the use of biometric data collection of migrants from the age of six; introduces screening and border procedures with mandatory security checks for every undocumented person entering the EU; enables increased searches of personal items, opening the door to the extraction of mobile-phone data and seizing and mining of personal electronic devices to establish identity or assess credibility; foresees the use of high-tech prison-like facilities for containment; and encourages more surveillance, through drones, motion sensors, thermal imaging cameras and the like, at internal and external borders. Also in May 2024, the EU adopted the world's first comprehensive regulation on artificial intelligence (AI) – which was significantly weakened at the eleventh hour by member states eager to retain their power to use AI for migration and law enforcement.

‘Efficiency’ and the violence of deportations

In March 2025, weeks before introducing the first wave of pro-industry deregulation packages attacking labour rights, climate policies, digital rights and more, the European Commission proposed a sweeping new regulation aimed at achieving ‘swifter and more effective returns’. According to the Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, just 20% of people issued with an order to leave the territory are deported: ‘This number is far too low’.[295] To achieve greater ‘efficiency’ in the rate of deportations, the EU plans to harden the existing rules by creating a ‘common European system of returns’, expanding the use of detention and establishing deportation zones (so-called ‘hubs’) in countries outside Europe. In December 2025, European heads of states voted to add new provisions to the draft deportation law that would allow home raids and the seizure of electronic and other personal devices – bringing the EU closer to a climate of US-style ICE raids.

Meanwhile, at the time of writing, there are signs that staunchly liberal and socialist parties within the European Parliament – a joint partner in EU lawmaking alongside the Council – are prepared to compromise with far right parties to achieve a majority for the plenary vote. These parties include European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR), for whom border security and ‘preserving national identity’ are defining issues; and the Patriots group, which is ‘determined to protect [Europe’s] borders, to stop illegal [sic] migration and preserve its cultural identity’.

This focus on deportations, and the ‘efficiency’ of their enforcement, is not new. The EU’s Agenda on Migration, adopted in 2015, had as its first priority reducing incentives for irregular migration and strengthening of Frontex’s role in deportations. According to Statewatch:

> ‘There has long-been coordinated policy, legal and operational action on migration at EU level, and efforts to increase deportations have always been a part of this. However, since the ‘migration crisis’ of 2015 there has been a rapid increase in new initiatives, the overall aim of which is to limit the legal protections afforded to ‘deportable’ individuals at the same time as expanding the ability of national and EU authorities to track, detail and remove people with increasing efficiency.’[296]

This fixation on ‘efficiency’ has in turn led to the creation of complex EU systems for the tracking and monitoring of migrants, and methods to identify individuals potentially subject to deportation. In other words, it has led to an extensive infrastructure of surveillance, monitoring and control. Within a year of the passage of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), a watershed in data privacy, the EU adopted legislation to establish interoperable migration databases – a colossal information technology infrastructure for immigration control encompassing the personal, including sensitive biometric, data of virtually every non-European with administrative ties to the EU. This infrastructure, which ignores the GDPR’s guarantees in the name of security, is intended to support efforts to ‘tackle irregular migration’ and ‘serious crimes like terrorism’ and ultimately assist national efforts to increase deportations. The system’s scope is immense, sweeping up millions of people forced to engage with EU immigration processes and now-interconnected databases.

The language of ‘efficiency’ – and indeed of ‘interoperability’ – obscures the racist and cruel nature of the mass deportation project. Deportations, which the EU refers to euphemistically as ‘returns’, have a long history in Europe as a tool – including by openly fascist leaders – to consolidate borders and homogenise populations. They were a hallmark of mass purges in the twentieth century, including Stalin’s Great Purge of 1934, Poland’s Operation Vistula in 1947, and the Nazis’ campaigns of deportation and other forced displacement. Modern deportations are not only characterised

by anguish for those facing expulsion, who are uprooted from family, friends and livelihood and confronted with degrading and sometimes aggressive treatment; the condition of being 'deportable' also functions as a form of coercive control, limiting a person's movements and installing a sense of perpetual fear and anxiety in the face of potential deportation and exile.[297]

Deportation is also part of wider forms of social control[298] and, in Europe, are part of a disturbing pattern of repression involving threats to deport or to strip people of their residence status (thus rendering them deportable) if they criticise the state or champion the rights of marginalised people.[299] Hasha Walia, a writer and activist, reminds us in her 2021 book *Border and Rule* of the role of deportation, 'globally, as a tool of historical control and repression, against sex workers, women, indigenous people and others subjected to processes of 'constructing national identity through race and racial difference'.[300]

Criminalisation and the migrant 'threat'

The notion of 'threat' that permeates EU migration politics, and that is integral to any fascist project, is deeply racialised in its conflation of 'foreign-ness' and the risk of violence, and contributes to the systematic criminalisation and demonisation of non-citizens. In the wake of attacks in October and November 2020 in Austria and France, European leaders 'single[d] out migrants (explicitly) and Muslims (implicitly) as a problem',[301] attributing extremism to migrants' failure to 'integrate' and the need to fortify the EU's borders and cities with more policing and surveillance.

The paradox of criminalisation is that, as in early twentieth-century fascism, it is paired with victimhood and the invocation of fear to justify increasingly militarised responses and repression in the name of 'safety' and 'security'. The EU's internal security strategy refers to a multitude of supposed border-related risks,[302] like identity fraud, non-citizens presenting unspecified 'security risks', migrant smuggling, terrorism, and human trafficking – all of which are used to rationalise proposals for deepened securitisation, from a tripling of EU's border force to enhancing surveillance of air and maritime travellers, and the video-surveillance of roadways. The military-style focus on risk is also used to further justify an insatiable appetite for personal data to assess and predict threat.

Countries at Europe's periphery have long had a role in the outsourcing of immigration controls and containment of undesired migrants, leveraging differential power dynamics – a form of violence referred to in EU technocratic language as 'externalisation':

> '[W]ith the prospect of full membership in the Schengen space, the EU space or both, some states along the Balkan Route willingly submit to carrying out extreme violence (most notably massive and violent pushbacks) to protect the external EU border (Croatia, Bulgaria) or to comply with the newly assigned role of being an EU 'dumping ground' for deterred migrants (Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina).[303]

The EU also uses its economic and political power to extract cooperation from countries like Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Mauritania and Türkiye, which accept to deter people from crossing or leaving their territories in exchange for development aid, visa liberalisation or cash.[304] Atrocities committed against migrants in Libya and elsewhere are well-documented, including torture and EU-funded kidnapping operations that forcibly transport people to the desert and leave them to die. All are outcomes of the EU's mass deportation agenda.

For European bureaucrats, the inflammatory language of vulgar extreme far-right politicians is replaced with the language of 'security' – no less vague in 2025 than the *sécurité* invoked by Jean-Marie Le Pen in 1986. Far from the fiery agitation of the prototypical fascist, a punitive system of containment and dislocation – or, in the EU's language, detention and return – is approached dispassionately as a matter of enforcement of rules. Irregular migration is not the product of imperial bordering, it's a question of people not following rules. The hideous work of deterrence is outsourced to other countries, or to specialised enforcement agencies in Europe or abroad. Technocrats are therefore comforted by their faith in the possibility of 'solving' migration through technological[305] and technocratic security fixes that sanitise the border regime's brutality through the language of efficiency, while feeding notions of safety centred on (expanding) the coercive power of the state.

Much as 'protecting the border' through the 'massive expansion of the carceral state and its subsequent privatisation was a bipartisan project' in the US,[306] so it is a unifying theme for the EU's 27 member states. Despite squabbles about the mechanics of enforcement and what constitute tolerable levels of brutality, there is broad consensus, reflected in the EU's Treaty of Lisbon, about the need for 'measures to combat' irregular migration – that is, forms of mobility formally restricted by the EU or its member states. As with other liberal regimes, the EU's borders are 'permeable for white expats, a handpicked immigrant diaspora, and the rich investor class', while forming a 'fortress against the million in the 'deportspora', who are shut out, immobilized, and expelled'.[307]

Of course, selective permeability also includes categories of labour – seasonal, temporary, undocumented – for whom reluctant admission is conditioned on profound and perpetual precarity. This is the contradiction of imperial bordering: the brutality of immigration control coexists with the dependence of Western economies on the labour of non-citizens. As the immigrant rights organiser Maru Mora-Villalpando notes, 'We are not only dealing with the monster of detention and deportation; we are also dealing with the monster of liberalism'.[308] Both monsters have not only become widely tolerated in the West, but are longstanding 'policy tools' deployed by the ruling class to preserve their economic position.

Coalitions of Crisis and the Political Economy of Border Fascism

Today's political system is tightly controlled by transnational capital. According to Bernard Gross in *Friendly Fascism*, this co-mingling and conflating of state and corporate interests has contributed to the mainstreaming of neofascist positions: 'This is not the result of Radical Right shifts towards the centre. On the contrary, it is the result of a decisive movement towards the right by Ultra-Rich and the Corporate Overseers'.[309]

Richard Brady wrote in 1943, in *Business as a System of Power*, that a key transformation highly relevant to the formation of fascism was the rapid amassing of organised economic power by businesses – particularly big business – through the creation of trade associations, such that 'by the late thirties, the industrial and financial giants had practically without exception moved into the citadels of peak-association power all over the world'.[310] Before World War II, trade associations and related industry groupings were rare. After the war, 'they sprang up everywhere, and shortly began to serve as centralized, coordinating, business-policy boards for vast segments of several national economies'.[311] This structure was streamlined, not abolished, under the Nazis.

The early nineteenth century was therefore a critical moment for the consolidation of corporate power in a way that was leveraged by fascists in their rise to power, and that continues to shape corporate power, and corporate–state collaboration, today.

In Europe, scholars like Martin Lemberg-Pedersen have studied the political economy of border securitisation and the systemic shifts towards private security companies' involvement in co-designing what he calls 'borderscapes'. This is achieved through partnership, lobbying, private rule- and standard-setting and framing their input as expert knowledge.[312] The result is the intense merging of economic and political power, with the interests of traditional and newer security actors, including tech companies, shaping, and reaping the financial benefits of, an increasingly securitised anti-migrant politics.

Lobby groups of border security companies like the European Organization for Security and Association of AeroSpace and Defence Associations of Europe are enormously influential in European policy circles. As are informal groups like the Kangaroo Group, established in 1979 as 'friends of the European Parliament'. The Kangaroo Group seeks a 'truly borderless single market' and strong EU external borders. Honorary members in 2019 included a former French president, a former Italian prime minister and a former Spanish foreign minister.[313] In 2024, regular members included high-ranking Members of the European Parliament (MEPs), former MEPs, representatives from other European institutions, academics, and aerospace and defence companies Airbus, Boeing, Safran Group, and the European Organisation of Military Associations and Trade Unions (EUROMIL).[314]

In 2025, the EU is in the throes of a feverish deregulation agenda to sweep aside obstacles to growth, competition, and sovereignty, alongside a push to both rearm and invest in national industries, most notably defence and tech. In other words, it has openly embraced a corporate agenda in an effort to shore up its global economic position. Accelerated by the 5% of gross domestic product (GDP) target agreed by many NATO members, this course of action was spurred by the 'Draghi report', published in September 2024, which describes 'security' as a 'precondition for sustainable growth'. The report calls for bolstering competitiveness and growth through investments in 'defence industrial capacity', which increasingly includes technological capacity. The EU's new internal security strategy predictably calls for investments in 'modern' technology like AI and its exploitation in both civil and defence contexts. Demonstrating how EU industrial and security policies are deeply informed by anti-migrant politics, the internal security strategy including priorities on 'border security', such as the tripling of the EU's border force, Frontex, to 30 000 officers 'equip[ped] with advanced tech for surveillance and situational awareness'.

We see, then, in the EU context, the profound interconnections between the expansion of racialised repression and the deeply embedded and intertwined interests of states and corporations. This is a symptom of the current capitalist order where technological advancements have liberated capital from the strictures of the state and massively expanded corporate power, and giving rise to a class of transnational capitalists.[315] Borders have become even more crucial in this context: while capital flows freely, labour remains largely contained. Indeed, the 'free flow of capital *requires* precarious labour, which is shaped by borders through immobility'.[316]

Transnational capital's enormous accumulation of wealth and power has also driven massive inequality and the depletion of the planet – and profoundly eroded the legitimacy of liberal governments among those it has left behind. The resulting social unrest has led to an unprecedented expansion of repression and surveillance – providing additional business to the very companies that are policing labour and borders.

It's not surprising, given the economic incentives, that the border and tech industries are also ideological advocates for fascism and far-right politics, The founding mission of US firm Palantir, for example, whose global revenue reached USD 2.87 billion in 2024, is 'saving the West'. The

CIA's venture capital fund, In-Q-Tel, gave Palantir its first injection of cash to create data-analytics technology to help the agency's work. Today Palantir's software is used by militaries, police forces and corporations throughout the world. Co-founder and chief executive officer (CEO) Alex Karp said in December 2025 that he cares about two things: immigration and 're-establishing the deterrent capacity of America'. He declared in a recent book that 'the rise of the West was not made possible by the superiority of its ideas, values or religion, but rather by its superiority in applying organized violence'.[317] The Trump administration's national security strategy, published on 11 December 2025, echoes this vision, elevating 'border security' as the 'primary element of national' security:

> 'We must protect our country from invasion, not just from unchecked migration but from cross-border threats such as terrorism, drugs, espionage, and human trafficking. A border controlled by the will of the American people as implemented by their government is fundamental to the survival of the United States as a sovereign republic.'

We see, then, the 'fusion of financial, extractive, and digital capital with the military-prison-and-border-security industrial complexes that offer capitalists a potential solution to the crisis of liberal hegemony, though only through the pursuit of increasingly aggressive forms of domination and repression'.[318]

Beyond the banal and the brutal

Today, I live far from Jamaica and the Americas and their legacies of empire; in the EU's capital city, the seat of regional power and of rising technocratic nativism.

Sitting at a recent event in Brussels, where there was much hand-wringing about the EU's plans to massively deregulate rights and protections across multiple sectors, a speaker reminded the audience that, 'for some of us, it was always like this'. Advocates and activists are rightfully concerned about Europe's shift towards a blatantly pro-industry agenda. The speaker – a migrant woman, activist and scholar – was recalling, for an audience steeped in policy and Euro-speak, that for those from communities systematically excluded from frameworks of protection and targeted for repression for the 'threat' they pose to the status quo, this feels less like a major shift than like continuity.

Brendan O'Connor argues that defeating fascism requires clarity of understanding that the struggle against fascism is 'necessarily anti-capitalist'. What he calls border fascism is alive and well in Europe and is deeply rooted in global apartheid, where '[b]orders maintain hoarded concentrations of wealth accrued from colonial domination while ensuring mobility for some and containment for most'.[319] Its elements are exposed in the political economy of bordering, and the web of power and mutually reinforcing interests of European elites in perpetuating the justifications and expansions of border brutality, in the sanitised language of technocrats. Unlike the raw racism articulated by far-right politicians in Europe, or the Trump administration in its attack on migrants in the US, European bureaucrats and elites veil their 'war on migrants' in policy-speak, a focus on efficiency, 'risk-based' security management, and administrative rule-following, while outsourcing the most violent work of enforcement to repressive forces – in European cities, at sites of border control on EU territory and well beyond.

The normalisation across society of cruelty and exceptionalism in the treatment and position of foreigners – of non-citizens, sex workers, Indigenous people, ethnic, religious and gender minorities – has meant the normalisation of elements of fascism that are now ascendant as a neoliberal order in crisis. For those of us active in social justice, our aim cannot be to join the reformists in tinkering

at the edges of the crisis, or to defend democracy and rights without questioning the broader economic system that defines power and for whose benefit and protection it is exercised. On 20 January 2026, inspired by anti-ICE and pro-Palestine efforts, civil society launched #WekeepUsSafe to track and share resistance against deportations across the EU, and press for the defeat of the deportation regulation.

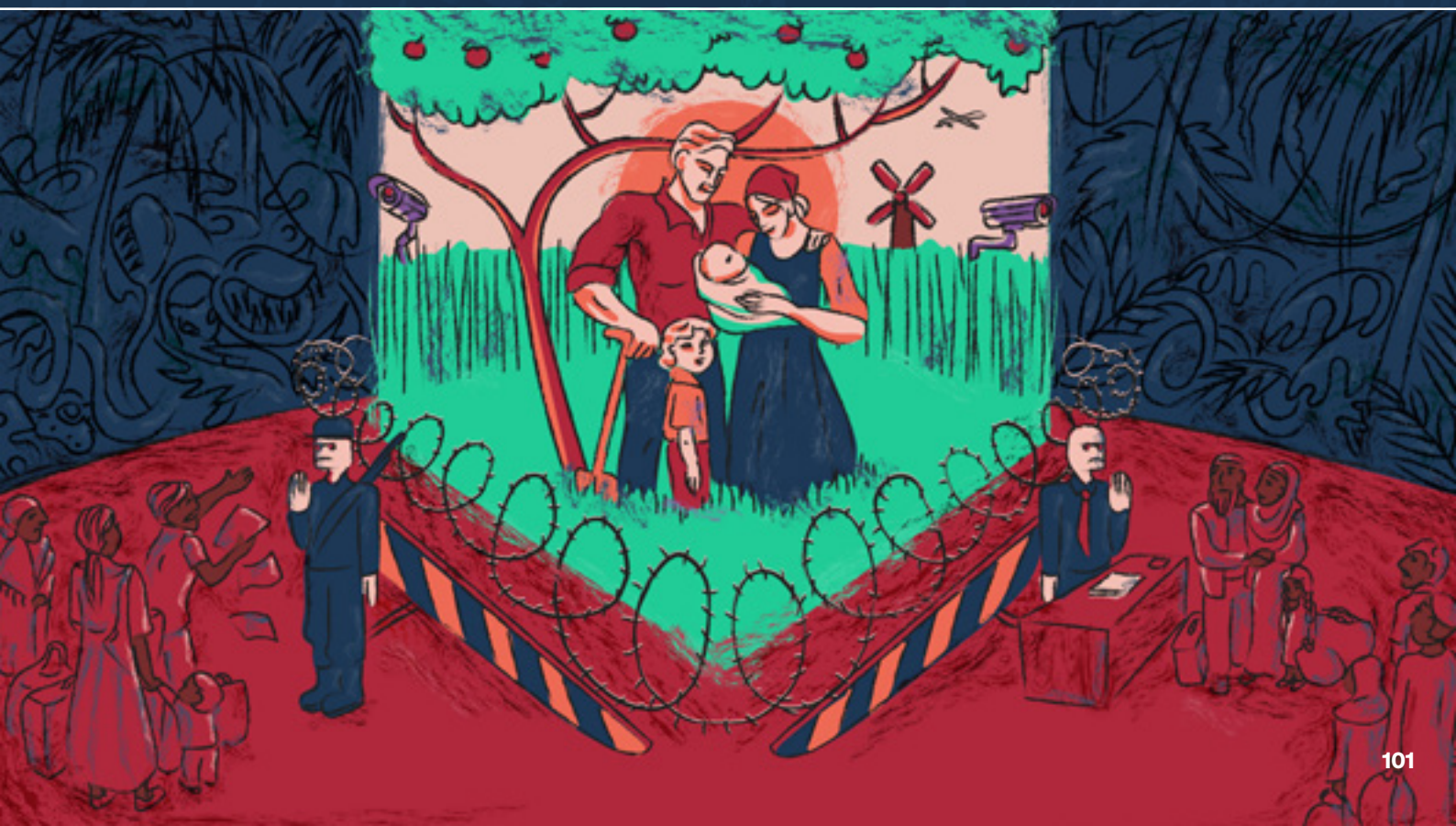
In refusing the violence of border politics, we must also refuse 'the banal liberal centre' that answers anti-migrant politics with paternalistic calls to humanitarianism or instrumentalising claims about migrants' benefits to European society. We must instead shift from 'notions of charity and humanitarianism to restitution, reparations, and responsibility'[320] and support the movements challenging these interlocking systems of oppression, through local action and global solidarity.

BIO

Alyna Smith is a Brussels-based advocate who works at the intersection of tech, migration and justice. She built and for several years led the digital rights program at Platform for International Cooperation on Undocumented Migrants (PICUM), Europe's only network focused on the rights of undocumented people, where she was also Deputy Director until the end of 2024. Alyna is currently researcher at Equinox Initiative for Racial Justice for the Tech Infrastructure Project, a partnership with The Institute for Technology in the Public Interest. She has a background in the life sciences, philosophy and law, and sits on the boards of EDRi, a Europe-wide digital rights' network, and the non-profit investigative newsroom Lighthouse Reports.

THE NEW BLOOD AND SOIL: Nature, culture, and eco-fascism on the identitarian right

Matt Varco



The far-right may be known today for their climate denialism, but there is an emerging strand of fascist politics that draw on ecological metaphors to justify xenophobic politics. This articulation could become more popular at a time of economic and environmental crises, unless environmental movements protect against these far-right intrusions and articulate a clear anti-fascist politics.

This writer came of age politically in the 'merchants of doubt' era. The far-right I have known is neoliberal, pro-market, and deregulationist. As such, I have become accustomed to an image of those on the right of the political spectrum as the great enemies of the environment. They are fossil capitalists, even fossil fascists; they want to 'Drill, Baby, Drill', tearing up the earth to sate the petro-capitalist death drive. But my studies of the far-right in Germany (and beyond) have led me to realise that, historically, this stance towards ecological questions represents only one among several possible options for the right. As the 2020s usher in a new age of nativism, and the high-tide of globalisation starts to recede, the far-right is rediscovering other ways of articulating its authoritarian worldviews with ideas of nature and the environment. This essay warns of how the right is tapping philosophical sources within its own intellectual tradition and using these to develop ecological positions beyond established climate denialism. I begin with a case study from Germany, a hotbed of these kinds of ideas since the Industrial Revolution, and then broaden the scope to consider the resonance of these eco-nationalist and eco-fascist ideas in other geographical contexts.

Understanding ecology from the right

Many regard right-wing ideologies (nationalism, conservatism, fascism) as being fundamentally incompatible with environmentalism. The former think in terms of borders, hierarchies, and the nation, whereas the latter requires, by definition, an internationalist, planetary horizon of politics. Although the last 50 years have seen anti-environmentalism become the default position of nationalist and right-wing populist parties across the world, driven by billionaire philanthropists and fossil fuel interests,[321] this connection masks a much longer history of ecological thinking within different currents of right-wing political thought and practice. Historically, critics have shown how appeals to 'nature' help shore up political constructs that serve the powerful, from the idea of borders[322] as 'natural', timeless separations between different human groups, to the idea of class hierarchy as an organic feature of human society.[323] Ecological metaphors can also be transferred uncritically into reactionary claims about human societies – witness the discourses around invasion biology,[324] for example, which Banu Subramaniam argues provides cover for xenophobic distinctions between 'domestic' and 'alien' species based on arbitrary criteria of 'nativeness', or the use of concepts like 'carrying capacity' from ecological economics to justify tight restrictions on immigration[325] by nativist environmentalist think tanks in the United States (US).

To understand these contemporary affinities, it is useful to look back to the twin birth of romanticism and nationalism in the nineteenth century, particularly in Germany, where the two movements were particularly pronounced. As societies grappled with the unfolding effects of modernity, urbanisation and the industrial revolution, many artists and writers tried to push back against a scientific worldview that reduced the natural world to inert raw material to be exploited to human ends. This drive against the rationalising and fragmenting thrust of modernity led to a search for roots, wholeness, and authenticity, which for many Romantics could be found in the study of nations and their customs. The German folklorist Wilhelm Riehl often celebrated the vitality of the peasantry and countryside, as a

counterweight to the uprootedness of city life. His 1854 book *Land und Leute* claimed there were deep historical links between geography and ethnicity, and posited three 'zones' within German-speaking Europe, populated by distinct climatically defined cultures. This use of the natural environment as a primary explanation for human differences appealed to Romantics elsewhere who were looking for more organic explanations of human history. For example the English writer George Eliot (the pen name of Mary Ann Evans) reviewed *Land und Leute* favourably, praising Riehl's sensitivity to the environmental influences on national culture. A critic of industrialisation herself, Eliot lamented that the German depth of feeling towards the past, valorised by Riehl, had been made impossible in England by the rise of 'Protestantism and commerce'. This vein of 'agrarian romanticism', as Riehl described his politics, was quite earnest about nature as a source of cultural vitality, but also set up a rigid and essentialising view of how human society is determined by its environment.

In the early twentieth century, the *Heimatschutz* movement, a grouping of early middle-class conservationist societies, inherited these strands of Romantic thought and channelled them towards the wholesale protection of landscapes. *Heimatschutz* drew on the ambiguous meanings of *Heimat,* signifying both 'natural habitat' and 'national homeland', to advance an agenda on environmental protection with a strong emotional charge. Some historians praised *Heimatschutz* for its ability to channel people's emotions into environmentalist action,[326] but Thomas Lekan also reveals the strong nationalist currents within the movement, particularly in wartime, when it drifted into a more exclusive understanding of who belonged to, and in, the German *Heimat*. In Lekan's phrase, this was a conservationist movement that provided ways of 'imagining the nation in nature'.

In a more scientific vein, the modern paradigm of 'ecology' can also be traced back to Germany, to the zoologist Ernst Haeckel, who coined the term to refer to the study of interconnections between living beings. He was also the co-founder of the German Monist League in 1906, which advocated for monism, a philosophical alternative to dualism (man vs nature, subject vs object, etc.), but which took on a strong nationalist orientation and attracted many members from eugenics associations.[327] The League became a vehicle for the political application of Haeckel's ecological ideas, which drew on the idea of national communities as living, growing entities engaged in a struggle over scarce resources. This highly social Darwinist philosophy has been widely credited with inspiring the ideas of *Lebensraum* and *Geopolitik* which influenced the National Socialists some decades later.[328]

To this day, parts of the German right still reach back to this tacit sense of the German people as uniquely and innately 'in touch' with the natural world, even as it remains hostile to other parts of an environmentalist agenda. Much of the radical right in Germany remains outspokenly opposed to *Klimapolitik* on populist grounds (again often funded by the lobbying arm of US fossil capital[329]), depicting climate legislation as being inflicted on ordinary people by an out-of-touch, cosmopolitan Green elite obsessed with abstract questions of climate and ignorant of local concerns. Despite the vocabulary of a 'culture war' regarding green legislation, the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) still depicts itself as the defender of a natural German homeland threatened by the uprooting effects of immigration and globalisation.[330] In 2023, Germany's longstanding neofascist National Democratic Party (NPD) changed its name to *Die Heimat*, tapping the emotional and political undercurrents of this loaded term for the natural environment. Even supposedly apolitical calls to participate in sustainability initiatives often appeal to a tacit version of a similar impulse, positioning Germany's leadership on questions of environment and energy as a source of positive national pride[331] (in high demand in a national context wracked by anxiety about legitimate and illegitimate forms of nationalism).

Die Kehre and identitarian ecology in Germany

Attempting to channel these diverse natural–national associations into a more concrete ideology and policy programme, a group of nationalist activists around the former AfD staffer Jonas Schick, founded *Die Kehre* magazine in 2020. Schick's political roots lie in the identitarian scene – a young, educated, technologically savvy and culturally energised strand of right-wing nationalism newly popular in Europe.[332] Linked with many of the major right-wing populist parties through think tanks, party youth chapters, and personal connections, these identitarian activists aim to keep a stream of radical ideas flowing into the European political mainstream, pressuring parties like the AfD to maintain their radicalism and resist co-option into the political establishment. *Die Kehre* is a particularly vivid illustration of this strategy at work. It is pitched as a sophisticated, respectable magazine of conservative ecological ideas, with the tagline, 'Journal for Nature Protection'. The phrase *'die Kehre'* translates as 'the turn', a reference to the existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger's 1962 essay 'Technology and the Turn', which critiqued the 'technologisation' of western societies and the increasing abstraction of modern life.[333]

The magazine's leaders have clearly made an effort regarding *Kehre's* presentation and optics. Its staff writers have master's degrees or even PhDs; the contributors page spotlights reams of relevant expertise in fields of energy, agriculture, and urbanism. Since its founding in 2020, *Kehre* has already secured some high-profile guest interviews with figures in the world of science and ecology – the British nature writer Dave Goulson, the US anarchist Derrick Jensen – major victories for a young magazine with a circulation probably in the low thousands. In contrast to its precursor magazine *Umwelt&Aktiv*,[334] an NPD-affiliated, eco-nationalist tabloid-style publication, whose subscriptions and niche in the far-right publishing market it inherited, *Kehre* pursues an intentionally high-brow strategy. Its articles on ecology, society and history are peppered with references to literature and history, and heavily footnoted with articles from *Nature* and *Science,* the International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), as well as works of social theory. A representative article on 'Growth and Consumer Society' refers to Ulrich Beck's *Risk Society*, Karl Polanyi's *The Great Transformation,* and Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity, using these to call for a return to 'German ways of life' as an antidote to turbulent and uncertain social conditions. The magazine also enjoys plenty of access to the upper ranks of the AfD, and the European right-wing intellectual elite. *Kehre's* early issues ran intimate interviews with new-right intellectual Götz Kubitschek and the head of AfD's Thüringen branch, Björn Höcke, widely seen as one of the party's most radical figures. Kubitschek writes of his love of the slow rhythms of life on the land in his small village, while a six-page feature shows Höcke relaxing in an orchard with Schick, the latter dressed in the academic smart casual attire often favoured by identitarian activists.

The Berlin-based antifascist library Apabiz calls *Die Kehre* a 'high-gloss magazine', positioning it as a mainstreaming vehicle for ethno-nationalist ideas.[335] Behind its intellectualised justifications, much of *Kehre's* content follows a predictable slate of far-right demands, inveighing against immigration, multiculturalism, feminism, and Islam. But what sets *Kehre* apart from other European far-right journals is how it filters these talking points through a rooted, place-centred, ecological idiom. A recurring keyword across *Kehre's* editorials and articles is the idea of *Oikos*, the Greek word for 'home' or 'hearth', and the root of the modern word 'ecology'. Schick's editorial for the magazine's inaugural issue pivots around this concept, which for him symbolises why a true ecological programme can only be realised from the right. In contrast to the liberals who dominate the Green Party, Schick writes, *Kehre* approaches ecology 'from a holistic perspective'. Its goal is to:

> ...put a stop to the present narrowing of ecology to 'climate protection', and broaden our perspective on where its original meaning lies: that it is the study of the whole environment, cultural landscapes, rites and customs, which includes the home and the farm ('Oikos') as its namesake suggests.

This helps clarify the apparent contradiction of a philosophy simultaneously opposed to legislation on climate change but supportive of 'conservation' in a wider (national and racial) sense. Schick critiques mainstream environmentalism for being beholden to an Enlightenment worldview of human agency and therefore fixated on technological solutions to ecological problems, which leads to an exclusive focus on global climate metrics over the more tangible ways people engage with nature (namely, *Heimat*).[336] After this re-scaling of 'ecology', *Kehre's* pages propose right-wing articulations of numerous other ecological concepts: 'sustainability' means not just consuming resources in a way that allows them to be replenished naturally, but ensuring that a whole society can reproduce itself demographically without relying on immigration. De-growth, to which a whole issue is devoted, does not entail a critique of capitalist production, but becomes a jumping-off point for imagining a new social order based around ethnic solidarity in small, kin-based communities. Indeed, one of the overarching fantasies of the *Kehre* project is that of an ethnically homogenous society directed around the principles of rootedness, natural order, and identity. To this end, *Kehre* draws on the idea of 'bioregionalism,'[337] a concept originating in anarchist and social ecology movements to imagine forms of social organisation more adapted to ecological processes, but refashioned here as the conceptual backbone of an ethno-nationalist vision for Europe. One article, titled 'Against the Sellout of the Heimat: Bioregional Identity Against the Disappearance of Place', explains the relevance of the bioregion to a nationalist project:

> What is a bioregion? Firstly, it is no mere biotope, but rather a natural-spatial unit shaped over long periods of time by an indigenous people through local centres into a relatively homogenous cultural landscape which differs from its bordering regions. The idea of bioregionalism therefore also captures the defining character, the 'soul' of a landscape, which leaves an unmistakeable stamp on the inhabitants of an ecosystem and their culture.

This definition also cites the concept of 'cultural landscape', which encompasses the natural environment but also the spiritual essence of its inhabitants. Like Riehl's agrarian romanticism, this worldview understands cultures and environments as part of an organic unity. This is not inherently problematic and is shared by many other environmental philosophies. But this connection between human beings and nature is then recontextualised as the basis for an exclusive claim on the land by its supposedly native inhabitants. On this view, environmental destruction is bad not just on its own terms, but because it deprives peoples of those natural features from which their national energy and character are derived.

At the same time, the arrival of 'non-natives' risks diluting or even destroying the long-standing bonds that arise from continuous dwelling in place. Indeed, the suspicion that this philosophical venture into bioregionalism is a pathway to a nativist citizenship policy and closed borders is confirmed in the author's discussion of how the boundaries of *Heimat*, place, and community are to be defined. Though the idea of bioregionalism as a long-term, place-based identity leaves the door open, in principle, for naturalised citizens to display this kind of ecologically rooted citizenship, for this author, 'merely' being born somewhere does not mean having 'roots' in that place. They write: 'A sense of a region as one's *Heimat* is only acquired after a longer stay, and even then not always'. This phrasing reveals an ideology of racially defined citizenship; a national identity based on blood and descent, not on values or attachments. That this intergenerational definition of 'nativeness' based on

uninterrupted residence is completely incompatible with the countless upheavals, displacements, and border revisions throughout Germany's history, and would be utterly impossible to implement in that country of all places, is not remarked upon. This racialised reading of bioregionalism ends up representing the same dream of wholeness embedded in that older Nazi slogan of blood and soil, the dream of a natural, purified, closed social order.

Kehre's ecological politics is surprisingly internally coherent, with numerous national-conservative positions related back to a core set of principles (roots, place, and organic society), but its worldview ultimately relies on a series of sleight-of-hand manoeuvres. First a move from a universal to a local understanding of the environment; and second, a very specific and nativist interpretation of what comprises 'the local', defining community and belonging in a way that excludes the movement's others and enemies. What makes this ideology particularly worrying, however, is that in many contexts these are thoroughly plausible manoeuvres. The logical steps involved do not depart in a major way from culturally dominant ways of talking about the environment: the natural metaphors we use to talk about people, and the social metaphors we use to talk about nature, the treatment of native species with care and non-native species with suspicion, the use of roots as a common shorthand for legitimate cultural belonging, the association of landscapes with patriotic values and so on. The danger of *Kehre's* nativist take on ecology, and with eco-fascist arguments more generally, is arguably in how intuitive and 'truthy' their style of argumentation feels; that for many people, this is not seen as an extreme, or even particularly 'ideological' way of talking about the world. Ultimately, its obscure origins and minority position in most far-right movements offers no reassurance that these ideas will remain niche – they are able to be absorbed into the mainstream precisely because they work with the grain of dominant ways of talking and thinking about nature and society (an important part of the New Right's 'metapolitical' strategy[338] of normalising ethno-nationalist ideas within the domain of culture and common sense).

Eco-fascism in a global context

This new 'blood and soil' politics is far from an exclusively German phenomenon, and plenty of evidence suggests it has a growing transnational appeal. The ideological networks around *Die Kehre* alone reveal a tangled web of sources and influences, as ideas are translated (literally and figuratively) between different national contexts. *Kehre's* primary philosophical influence, for example, is the late English philosopher Roger Scruton. One of Scruton's later books, *Green Philosophy* (2011), draws on Edmund Burke's idea of 'trusteeship' and intergenerational responsibility to propose the idea of 'oikophilia'.[339] This 'love of home' is positioned as the foundational motive driving any kind of environmentalist action, and one which situates the latter as an inherently conservative endeavour (one which quite literally wishes to *conserve*). This, in contrast to a 'radical environmentalist movement', which Scruton critiques for 'defining itself through global agendas, internationalist campaigns and world-wide mobilization', a dangerous project which 'uproots what it claims to serve, the search for roots'. Scruton's proposals often sound sensible – looking after the place where you live, caring for your surroundings – but as we have seen, these appeals to home, roots, and land clearly lay a foundation for nativist, exclusionary interpretations of the same philosophical raw material.

Indeed, the potential for the boundaries of 'home' to be cast in an exclusionary way while retaining a positive, innocent façade makes 'oikophilia' an attractive concept for many on the ecologically conscious right; the translation, distribution and discussion of *Green Philosophy* among reactionary think tanks speaks to the demand for this kind of rooted, organic language of national identity. *Die Kehre's* publishing house (aptly named *Oikos Press*) credits Scruton as a 'Key Thinker', and

the magazine ran a favourable review of Scruton's *Green Philosophy* in its sixth issue, praising his reclamation of environmentalism (the 'crown jewels' of the right) from the liberal left. The reviewer concludes: 'it is conservatism's local character which makes it predestined to solve environmental problems'. Meanwhile the Spanish translation of the book, *Filosofía Verde*, is printed by the right-wing Catholic publisher Homo Legens and carries a combative prologue by Santiago Abascal, president of the far-right Vox party, who writes of his relief at having found a vision of environmentalism compatible with patriotism, tradition, and closed borders. The book was also well reviewed in the Orbánist think tank *Hungarian Conservative*:

> Albeit wrongly associated with the political left most of the time, green philosophy is integral to conservatism too. The late, great Roger Scruton believes that environmental protection should be based on one's love for their local territory and community, and not be dictated top-down through a globalist agenda.

These are clear signs, then, that these reactionary articulations of ecology are filtering into the wider intellectual networks of the global radical right, much of which is directly plugged in to nationalist governments and parties. These networks play a key role in communicating these eco-nationalist manoeuvres – 'fear of the other' recast as 'love of home', ethno-nationalism recast as bio-regionalism – to wider right-wing circles and placing them in proximity to power. And though these nativist ideologies of nation and nature are prevalent in Europe, they are also increasingly visible in a wider global context. Studies of Hindutva,[340] for example, the ideology of Hindu nationalism behind Narendra Modi's Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, have shown its frequent use of ecological metaphors in its exclusionary nation-building discourses. The environmental scholar Mukul Sharma shows how Hindu nationalist narratives cast ethno-religious differences between Hindu and Muslim groups through a lens of purity versus pollution, and how Modi himself mobilises visions of India as an ancient ecological nation, making a nationalist case for green energy and staging PR stunts like 'holy dips' in symbolically charged natural settings.[341] And as certain (upper-caste, Hindu) groups and their cultural landscapes are regarded as being central to the essence of the nation, the construction of India's non-Hindi majority regions as racialised, unproductive frontiers provides the justification for a range of exploitative projects in the name of national security.[342]

Settler-colonial societies also feature racialised visions of the environment throughout their history. Alexandra McFadden's writings on the Australian far-right[343] show how claims of racial superiority are closely tied to the ability of white settlers to steward, tame, and 'civilise' the natural landscape. This vision of white civilisational superiority has supported the (ongoing) dispossession of Indigenous lands, as well as an overtly racialised 'White Australia' immigration policy, which existed well into the 1970s. Indeed, histories of conservation often highlight the origins of many conservation areas in the colonial era, where landscapes were protected for their aesthetic and recreational benefits for colonisers, and environmental stewardship was explicitly linked with ideas of racial superiority.[344] Similarly, in the Canadian context, Andrew Baldwin and colleagues deconstruct how the cultural imaginary of the 'Great White North' serves to romanticise a pristine Canadian wilderness and erase the long-standing claims of First Nations peoples to this land, establishing whiteness as a 'natural' part of Canadian national identity.[345] And in the US, preserving the nation's environments and its racial stock were often seen as one and the same necessity. This fusion was embodied in the person of Madison Grant, an Ivy League-educated lawyer who was a tireless advocate of national parks and the co-founder of the American Eugenics Society. In Grant's eyes, the blond man was just another 'pure and perfect specimen' to be preserved alongside the American bison and the bald eagle. Much of the myth of the American frontier rests on a similar belief in US superiority forged in a spiritual battle with the wilderness.[346]

These cases help us recognise that reactionary ideas about the environment aren't simply invented by philosophers and then circulated to powerful actors via clandestine channels. Many of these claims work entirely with the grain of dominant ways of talking about nature and national identity. Indeed, what makes these diverse strands of nativist nature-thinking relevant across cultural contexts is that they provide intuitive answers for a broad experience of ecological and political crisis. Naomi Klein and Astra Taylor take the temperature of this moment well with their discussion of 'end-times fascism',[347] describing a zeitgeist saturated with dreams of fortresses, lifeboats, and an 'exit' from obligations to others. These fantasies are shared by tech billionaires, neo-fascist intellectuals, and xenophobic politicians alike. But what projects like *Die Kehre* are engaged in is channelling these diverse cultural currents into policy positions, using a deep bench of philosophical sources, and nudging these inchoate emotions of insecurity and fear towards an organised, cross-border nativist project. In contrast to Klein and Taylor's sketch of an end-times fascism with no 'horizon', no sense of something following the end times, this identitarian project is equally invested in an 'end of the world' fantasy, but also in visions of what comes *after* the apocalypse. As I have written elsewhere,[348] its approach to the future is prefigurative, in actively trying to bring about a society that is securitised, racialised, and purified, through movement-building efforts in economically depressed rural areas. Imminent social and ecological collapse, on this view, are taken as given; and these right-wing ecological projects are invested in preparing for the new possibilities this post-collapse world will bring for downscaled ethnically organised forms of society. Clearly, the dream of a homogenous society, and a life in harmony with nature, is a powerful tonic in crisis-saturated times.

Beyond eco-fascism

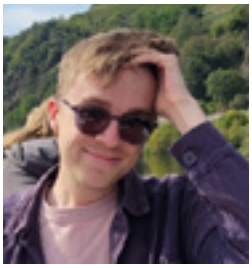
A string of white nationalist terror attacks through the late 2010s committed by self-identified 'eco-fascists' catalysed a wave of public concern about the threats of this dangerous new composite ideology.[349] But a focus on these most visible and shocking acts of violence perhaps obscures the wider ideologies that sustain those hierarchical and murderous worldviews. The current danger is less that a militant eco-fascist movement will slowly gain followers and become strong enough to depose governments (though in the right-accelerationist scene, this is always a dream[350]), but that amidst the unfolding conditions of crisis and collapse, dehumanising scripts of where people 'naturally' belong are normalised, and the militarised systems supporting these separations are consolidated and extended. In *The Rise of Eco-Fascism,*[351] Moore and Roberts call for 'clear-eyed opposition to the forms of racialized power that are wielded over and through the environment, be they "fascist" or not'. This necessity is made clear in a recent speech by the European Union's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell, who traded freely in images of Europe as 'a garden', surrounded by a 'jungle' which wants to invade it. Though the 'gardeners' should take care of the garden, taming the 'high growth potential' of the encroaching jungle requires active management, not just 'high garden walls'. The social Darwinist metaphor is no coincidence; it quite aptly describes the calculative, punitive function of border agencies like Frontex, as a militarised system of surveillance and detention designed to filter out undesirable organisms and secure the garden's natural beauty.

Clearly then, dehumanising and racialising human beings from the Global South and Europe's former colonies via an ecological language of biohazards and invasive growth is not the exclusive purview of the extreme-right but works its way into the very institutional logics of the state (and supra-state) system. Rooting out these 'everyday ecofascisms',[352] in Menrisky's phrase, is undoubtedly a harder task than opposing individual fascist groups. But it clarifies the stakes of the social and political dimension of environmental politics. There is no predetermined path from ecological engagement to a progressive political worldview. Terms like 'sustainability', 'degrowth', or 'green transition' need

to be articulated within a politics with an inclusive and universal horizon: not just 'our native nature', but '*all of our* planetary home'. Civil society groups are already taking up this fight; groups like FARN[353] and the Heinrich Böll Foundation[354] provide detailed advice for local green initiatives to identify the signs and fight back against far-right incursions into their movements. And for millions of environmental justice activists opposed to the violent, colonial logics of capital, the fight to protect the environment, the fight against fascism, and the fight for a new world are one and the same.[355] Ecology must be anti-fascist, or it will be nothing at all.

BIO

Matt Varco is a human geographer from Manchester, currently living and working in Trier, Germany. His research looks at the ongoing connections between ecology and reactionary thought, particularly in the context of the German-speaking right.



IS OUR HOMELAND THE OTHER?

Care as a response to hate

Laura Roth

Could feminist care ethics provide a framework for listening and engaging with far-right supporters, that could build understanding, relationship and ultimately undermine fascist support?

In July 2025 a few Telegram and Instagram accounts connected to the organisation 'Deport them Now' called for an immigrant 'hunt' in Torre Pacheco, a municipality in the Spanish regionof Murcia. They set the dates for the 16, 17, and 18 July, but the fascists could not wait, and the police therefore had to activate security protocols before that. The violence lasted for several days, leading to numerous victims and several detentions.[356] These events are, to some extent, new in Spain, but the number of hate crimes was already high: almost 2,300 in 2023.[357]

The situation is no different in other countries. In the United States (US) alone, more than 300 acts of extreme violence are inspired by the far right every year,[358] including a rising number of cases considered as right-wing terrorism.[359] We all remember the fascist attack on the US Capitol on 6 January 2021. Far right violence has also been rising in Argentina[360] (310 recorded cases sdince 2020), as part of the wave[361] that brought Javier Milei to the presidency. The trend includds the attempted assassination of the former president Cristina Fernández in 2022.

This violence is only the tip of the iceberg - hate has become part of 'the new normal'. Elon Musk makes a Nazi salute. Javier Milei wields a chainsaw. Far-right politicians say 'immigrants steal our jobs', 'blacks ask for special treatment', 'trans people destroy family values', and the crowds go crazy, especially online. Hate has become one of the central pillars of far-right discourse and practice. A recent publication by CLACSO[362] explains that in many Latin American countries, including Argentina, 'the rapid expansion of the far right has the aim of turning violence into a permanent feature of social life and presents a real threat to democracy'.

Our societies are fracturing, and we can clearly see this in these three countries. While the far right is describing immigrants, LGBTQ people, and racialised communities as unwanted company, and receiving rising levels of support, they also accuse 'wokes', intellectuals, activists, and any left-wing politician of facilitating 'the great replacement',[363] disseminating 'gender ideology'[364] and a whole range of 'dangerous' societal changes.

On the left of this political divide, we often see far-right supporters as morally twisted and/or stupid, and maybe it is true. But it is also true that in practice, the social bonds between the two poles are being burned down daily by the way our lives are organised[365] both online and offline. We do not even spend time with 'them', we do not talk to each other, we listen even less. Yet democracies are based on the opinions of everyone, so even if we believe some people are losing touch with the real world, who is benefiting from this situation? The far right.

The rising support for extremism has allowed it to reach the presidency of two of the three countries I examine in this essay. Those who would previously vote for political options not based on (explicit) hate are now giving it a chance. My question is the following: what do we – those on the left – do with these new supporters of hate politics? Should we just focus on defending their target populations (the weak and disadvantaged) and on building alternatives and hope on this side? Should we merely focus on strengthening our own communities and collectives? These are certainly fundamental tasks, but neither are preventing the rise of the far right nor reducing polarisation. Do we even have a plan? Should we merely accept the growing separation and strengthen one side while giving up on the other?

My answer is no. We need to respond to hate with care, from the perspective of Feminist Care Ethics. If we hate back, or if we cancel or lecture far-right supporters, then we are only making things worse and also reacting in ways that are essentially patriarchal. I am perfectly aware that many readers will not support this conclusion, and that is fine. I also know that the talk about care, listening, relationships, and interdependence might sound repetitive, superficial, and too 'woo-woo' for some. In my experience, we are increasingly using these terms too often and too superficially. But there are strong feminist arguments in favour of moving beyond patriarchal standards of rationality, truth, duality, independence, and confrontation. Such a radical shift in our ways of thinking and doing will generate resistance and will be hard to put into practice, but the stakes are high, and I suggest that we should try.

We Respond in Patriarchal Ways

The discussions about how to respond to the rising support for the far right have been ongoing for some time. Proposals range from the French cordon sanitaire[366] to fact-checking by journalists and politicians, offering the material security that has been lost, taking legal action, improving media literacy, etc. But what about progressive activism? How are we responding? Are we merely reacting, or do we have a plan?

A couple of decades ago, to be an 'antifa' would typically (although not exclusively) mean to confront extremist groups, mainly on the streets; to have a presence that would outnumber haters, to dissuade them. Today, such a practice might no longer make much sense: it is often seen as a macho response that does not reflect the spirit of our times. Also, it could be too risky in some countries like the US, where guns are in anyone's hands and dangerous militias have been linked to the president.[367] Finally, most hate – arguably – happens online, and strategies need to be more nuanced.

The far right operates under dualistic patriarchal assumptions of us vs. them, and we on the left often buy into this way of thinking. In this essay I am deliberately replicating that view to illuminate the point. As social movements, political parties, and individuals we often have an adversarial discourse towards the far right. When we hear, or see, or suffer something harmful, racist, homophobic, unjust, discriminatory, etc., we often hit back. We accuse them (not just the leaders, but also their supporters) of being immoral, mean, stupid, and so on. We openly confront, criticise, say how morally sick they are. We engage in heated discussions claiming that their views are unacceptable. We do as Hillary Clinton did, when she called Trump supporters 'a basket of deplorables'.[368]

On other occasions, we cut ties with them, including family members or friends. Both online and offline, we cancel, we unfollow, we block, we stop talking to them. We break relationships and build our own cordons sanitaires. That makes total sense because we become tired and afraid. This type of reaction is, however, also rooted in dualistic and punitive views of our societies, which are also fundamentally patriarchal.

Yet we sometimes feel stronger and find our centre to offer rational arguments: we do fact-checking, explain the same argument over and over again. We talk about injustice and discrimination, trying to convince or educate by assuming recourse to the truth. Again, this kind of response is based on a patriarchal view or morality where impartiality is the only valid criterion.

All three types of reaction are more than understandable, and often necessary: the discourses and practices of the far right may trigger us in many ways. We do what we can and what we have learned to do. However, we need to distinguish between how we feel and how we should act. It is only human to feel anger, fear, or self-righteousness. But if we respond with confrontation, cancellation, or rely on rational justifications, we are also using patriarchal tools: all of them assume all-or-nothing situations, separation between us and them, disconnection, lack of understanding, the existence of a moral or empirical truth.

If instead we were to adopt the perspective of Feminist Care Ethics, we would argue that social relations matter, in addition to being right. Through this lens, we can also start to understand why our responses to the far right are not working.

By this I do not mean that the left are not focusing their energy on more feminist ways of doing politics: we practise care, we dedicate our energies to strengthening our communities and collectives, we join forces with other progressive groups, we imagine innovative strategies to build collective power through cooperation, we sustain those who are in need. We know how important political reproduction is for long-term political action, and sadly (but also luckily) often the harshest situations increase our creativity and our imagination: our communities are building strength in new ways against the threats of the far right. So why does this approach stop when we relate to those on the other side? Do we even want to expand our care?

A Feminist Care Ethics

In a White-dominated Euro-centric culture, we are used to associating what is right (ethics) with justice, at both a personal and at a political level. As activists, we often articulate our discourses, practices, and strategies in response to an injustice that needs to be dismantled or a specific harm that needs to be addressed or prevented. In most cases, the reason why we become activists is that we have a deep sense of justice. This way of thinking is extremely useful, but it is not problem-free. To understand why, we need to track where it comes from.

This kind of moral talk comes from two main theories: deontologism (famously defended by Immanuel Kant) and consequentialism (Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill), which were developed by many others after them. They are based on the idea that we need to take an impartial, general, and rational perspective in order to see what is right and wrong in the world; and that justice is based on respecting rights or maximising positive consequences. This applies to liberal theories, including egalitarian as well as to Marxist and republican ones, where the aim is to break alienation and/or relationships of domination. Some strands of feminism are also based on these assumptions.

But this is just one possible way of seeing the world. From the perspective of care-based feminist ethics, we take a particular perspective in which emotions, necessity, and responsibility are central. Even more importantly, this ethical perspective is based on relational ontologies: we exist only in relation to others and we are only because they are. This kind of view is defended – with differences – by some popular feminisms in the Global South, such as by certain ecofeminists in Latin America.[369] In addition to social and gender justice, they are grounded in a relational praxis and narratives, centred on communities and territories. In this specific case, they associate some of their central claims, including food and territorial sovereignty, not only with justice, but also with the daily work of caring for what is around us, ancestral spirituality and emotion – challenging colonial ways of thinking and being, which are based on the perspectives of privileged white cis-men (who seldom assume these reproductive roles).

In the 1980s, some US feminist writers such as Carol Gilligan and Virginia Held started to question mainstream justice-centred accounts, arguing that these were not neutral ethical positions, because they were based on the experience of (certain) men who occupy a restricted public sphere; and ignored other ways of evaluating what is right or wrong in daily life. In contrast, (and similar to the popular feminisms mentioned above) a Feminist Care Ethics[370] relies on the experience of those who are commonly responsible for care and social/political reproductive work. Here, we are all seen as vulnerable, partial, and interdependent; and that is intrinsically valuable, in addition to being a better depiction of reality. No one, not even ideally, can live on their own. These feminists argue that justice is important, but that there is no need for justice if no one does the care work of sustaining life. We are all interrelated and interdependent in myriad ways (even privileged white men, who probably do not see it). According to these feminists, our actions need to take into account relationships, needs, and emotions into account, and pay attention to how we all depend on each other. This does not mean no longer thinking and acting in terms of justice. But we also need to think and act in ways that are guided by care, and there will be many tensions between the two.

What is the meaning of this kind of ethics for activist practice? We need to include this care-based perspective in our work in general, thinking, feeling, and doing. To organise not only because of what is just or what will bring about the best outcomes, but also looking at the relationships of interdependence within our collectives/organisations, with the rest of society, and – probably the most difficult – with our political opponents.

In particular, when addressing the far right, but mainly their supporters, we need to realise that we all co-exist; we exist only because they do. We depend on each other in complex ways and on numerous levels, and none of us can escape this kind of interbeing. We take our children to the same schools, we walk or drive along the same streets, we pay taxes (or not), we eat what they cook, transport or plant, they buy what we sell, we vote in the same electoral systems. But more importantly, we define ourselves as activists in opposition to how they define themselves. We adjust our discourses, thoughts, and practices depending on what they do – and they do the same. They support right-wing supremacists because they feel unsafe in the face of numerous causes and conditions, most of them beyond their individual control. They vote for the far right because it speaks to those feelings, but also because the left does not take them seriously, and sometimes even humiliates them in different ways, treating them as intellectually and morally inferior.

What would it mean, then, to care for far-right supporters? According to Held, a care ethic is based on the values of sensitivity, empathy, responsiveness, and taking responsibility. This can be applied not only to the private domain, but also to public contexts and institutions, even at the global level.[371] We can choose to be guided by these values and foster caring relations while limiting actions that undermine them at all levels. We need to see ourselves as immersed in multiple communities, including a global one that is both responsible for and vulnerable to the current and future climate crisis. We need to take responsibility – if we can – not only for those who think like us, but also for those who do not, especially once we can see that failing to do so only deepens the fractures in our societies, with all sorts of electoral and policy-related consequences.

Maybe these statements sound too obvious or too naïve. But is it weak or incredibly bold to use care as a medicine to repair our broken societies? These are deep and complex questions, and I can only sketch some answers here, because we need broad collective reflections. Nevertheless, I propose three starting points.

We Listen to Understand

First, we need to listen. How can we convince far-right supporters to view others as equals worthy of respect and care if we fail to understand them? The first time that I read a serious defence of this kind of proposal was in Valarie Kaur's book, See No Stranger.[372] After suffering violence committed by white supremacists and by a male member of her own Sikh community, and also researching racist violence in the US after 9/11, she says that the way out includes listening to our opponents. If she can do that[373]– I thought – I must at least try.

Left-wing activists, politicians, and analysts are often quick to classify right-wing supporters as people who have been alienated, convinced, co-opted, and manipulated by far-right leaders. Communication strategies are in fact manipulative; they can help normalise discourses that should not be acceptable and can even lead people to use physical violence. Nevertheless, we need to understand why people are so frustrated, and why they feel so vulnerable and hateful. This does not mean legitimising the arguments that they offer, but also not lecturing them. We need to assume that they can change their opinions in the future and first we need to listen with an open mind.

I am not saying that the emotions or opinions of a white angry guy who votes for far-right parties are more important than the suffering of others, especially those who are more vulnerable because of their positionality. Of course, he has certain privileges, and he should try to dismantle them. He is also responsible for addressing his own trauma rather than holding opinions that hurt others. But my point is that if we see him only in terms of justice or consequences, we are missing an important point related to the embeddedness of his reality and the impossibility of disentangling him from the relationships of which he is a part. Are we – the left – doing or saying things that humiliate him? Are we ignoring his needs and assuming he is fully autonomous? Do we share any kind of suffering with him?

The key challenge is the following: Can we listen to people who defend racist, or misogynist, or homophobic views, not to lecture, but to understand? Valarie Kaur says that this deeper listening can give us insights that we otherwise lack. Studies have included this as a key element of 'deep canvassing' (respectful and non-judgemental conversations in order to influence people's voting intentions), and show that it is effective. Maybe it could also help us start seeing the world through another's eyes, and to start mending broken social relationships.

Some might say that it is not the role of victims to listen to the perpetrators or oppressors, and I agree. We need to be in a certain place, emotionally and structurally (and this is deeply related to the next point about trauma and care, below). But, from an intersectional perspective, not all left-wing activists are victims themselves, and in any case we cannot describe our positionality in dualistic terms. The polarisation that we see in Argentina, Spain, and the US is not between the privileged and the dispossessed, and maybe not everyone can start listening – but some of us do, in some contexts. The claim that none of us has the responsibility to listen because we already hold the truth is based on a perspective that misses the multiple ways in which we inter-exist with far-right supporters. If we practise generative listening,[374] maybe we can even start seeing ourselves and our collective future possibilities with new eyes.

Finally, in order to listen to others, we need not only to not only pay attention when they are speaking, but also to create the spaces and conditions for everyone to feel safe to speak their minds. We need to ask real questions – not make passive-aggressive statements ending with a question mark. Perhaps we can start by changing our approach when we come across people we already know, like friends and family. But more generally, we need to open physical spaces of encounter to break down the media echo chambers, where we can spend time with others who hold views different from our own. What this means more concretely is necessarily a local question.

We Take Care to Find Strength

Having the curiosity and the will to be with people we strongly disagree with and to listen to them is really hard for most of us. Depending on our positionality, it can be even harder and sometimes also too dangerous, for instance, if we are undocumented and/or racialised.

But even if that is not the case, we might be emotionally unprepared. As activists, we sometimes feel that things are too much to even think of listening. We are already helpless and hopeless; we already have a sense that we can never do enough; we are already hypervigilant; when things become difficult, we can already see how our creativity diminishes; we are sometimes unable to embrace complexity; we minimise other people's suffering in order to keep on going, because it can be too much; we are sometimes chronically tired and we have all sorts of physical ailments; we already feel guilt, anger, cynicism; we already feel difficulty with empathising; we already feel that our work is too important to stop or change course. As common as they seem, according to Laura van Dernoot Lipsky,[375] these can all in fact be signs of activist secondary trauma: a set of transformations suffered by people who work in environments where they deal with the suffering of other beings or the planet.

But again, if we are unable to move away from these mental or physical spaces (and maybe many of us cannot, which is fine), it means to a certain extent that we are giving up on those on the other side, and we are not addressing the widening gap that separates us from them. What do we need, collectively and individually, to be able to open our minds, hearts, and will so we can listen to and connect with those who support extreme right-wing views?

From the perspective of the nervous system, it is very hard to care about someone if we are in a fight-or-flight mode: when the sympathetic nervous system is active and the para-sympathetic one shuts down. We just want to run away, or we are so angry that we cannot hold back our rage and we offload all these feelings on the person in front of us. If we want to be with people and to listen to them, if we want to care for them, we need to shift our system to a rest-and-digest mode, because only then are we able to connect with others.

Does this mean that we should start skipping activist meetings so we can just do yoga and breathing work? No. This is not a call for spiritually bypassing or a defence of cheap individualistic and consumerist self-care choices where everything is solved with bubble baths and baking.

In reality, what we are asked to do is much harder than what we are used to. We need to tackle our trauma and burnout individually but also collectively if we want to be in a place of openness and solidity. We need to check that our collective practices do not contribute to stressing us, exciting our rage and self-righteousness, so that we can feel more at ease and can have a more nurturing attitude towards ourselves and the world. Instead of suppressing our emotions, we need to be present to our own suffering and the suffering of others. This is a huge source of energy[376] to address the deep challenges of our times.

Some years ago, together with Irene Zugasti and Alejandra de Diego we published the Feminise Politics Now![377] handbook, listing practices that activists were already implementing in order to make their organisations more feminist, many of which can be useful in this context. However, what it means to practise (individual and collective) self-care to open our minds and hearts is a question to which, again, we need to respond from the embedded positions that we currently occupy as people and as organisations/communities.

We Realise Interdependence to Build Power

Even if we were able to cancel all our far-right friends and family members, and all other members of our community who support fascists, we still depend on each other in multiple ways, as I have already outlined. We could move to another country, but hate politics is rising almost everywhere. We cannot escape it. Is it possible to resist this basic feature of our current reality?

I suggest that before (or while) we begin to question our individual and communal roles in relation to right-wing supporters, we need to realise our interdependence. The challenge is that, even if we rationally understand that we all depend on each other, we need a deeper understanding for it to work. We all remember how clearly we saw our interdependence when the COVID-19 pandemic took us by surprise. Suddenly, we were aware of those who transported things that we needed, cleaned our streets, took care of our children while we were working, grew our food, and far more. We already knew this, but then we actually felt it, and something clicked. And we acted accordingly at many levels. We can start by realising interdependence rationally, but we cannot stop there.

bell hooks explains in her book All about love that the commitment to thinking and behaving, honouring the principles of inter-being and interconnectedness, is first and foremost a spiritual task.[378] But she explains that spirituality is not a New-Age commodity; it has to do with the practice of love within the community. It is a deeply political practice connected to ending domination and oppression and is intimately connected to the practice of building power. She believes that love is the principle and the destiny, and that we need to embrace 'a global vision wherein we see our lives and our fate as intimately connected to those of everyone else on the planet' (p. 88) – including far-right supporters, we might add.

Realising interdependence is the ground on which we need to step to even want to start rebuilding our broken societies. Maybe it can also be a motivation to do the necessary personal and collective self-care that is needed to centre and open ourselves up to views that are opposite to our own. As Joanna Macy explains, once we realise that our self has different layers and we are able to widen our sense of self to include others, then maybe we no longer see our actions towards them as altruistic, but as normal:[379] like doing things for ourselves.

Becoming aware of our interdependence is key to building power. But here, we are not talking about power over others, this is, the patriarchal notion that tells us that power is an all-or-nothing game where some rule and others are ruled. The word power comes from the Latin verb potere, which means to be able. When we are able to broaden our sense of self, we sometimes feel the emergence of something bigger than the sum of its parts,[380] and we can do new things. Joanna Macy calls it emergence, while Otto Scharmer calls it presencing, and both have spent decades developing concrete practices, based on the wisdom of Indigenous peoples, to gain that kind of collective perspective through The work that reconnects[381] and Theory U.[382] Here, power is a verb, rather than a resource. When we emerge as a collective self, then we can do things that we could not do before.

Even if they use other terms, these reflections and notions might sound familiar to experienced activists in some parts of the world. However, at least in my experience, we often tend to see them as possible only within our own circles. Again, what this would mean in terms of reconnecting to the other side is a big question that we need to ask locally, based on our own circumstances and possibilities.

Conclusion

As one of my friends likes to say, the most basic form of care is 'to give a shit' about someone. In that sense, my main claim here is that we need to give a shit about far-right supporters if we want to stop this wave of hate. We will not be able to achieve that by merely speaking to them (especially not by attacking or lecturing them), but by deeply listening to understand, so we can then imagine new pathways. And we will only be able to listen if we collectively find a place of security and solidity where we can open our minds to what we are so far unable to get.

As I said at the beginning, in a democracy we count everyone's vote. This is how it works. We cannot build democracies only for those who agree with us, even if left-wing discourses sometimes seem to imply that. And this is not a weak or naïve position to take, but a very radical one. Many people think that activism means mainly fighting to win and doing good stuff, because we are right. This only shows the extent to which we are embedded in the patriarchal and capitalist logics that rule the world.

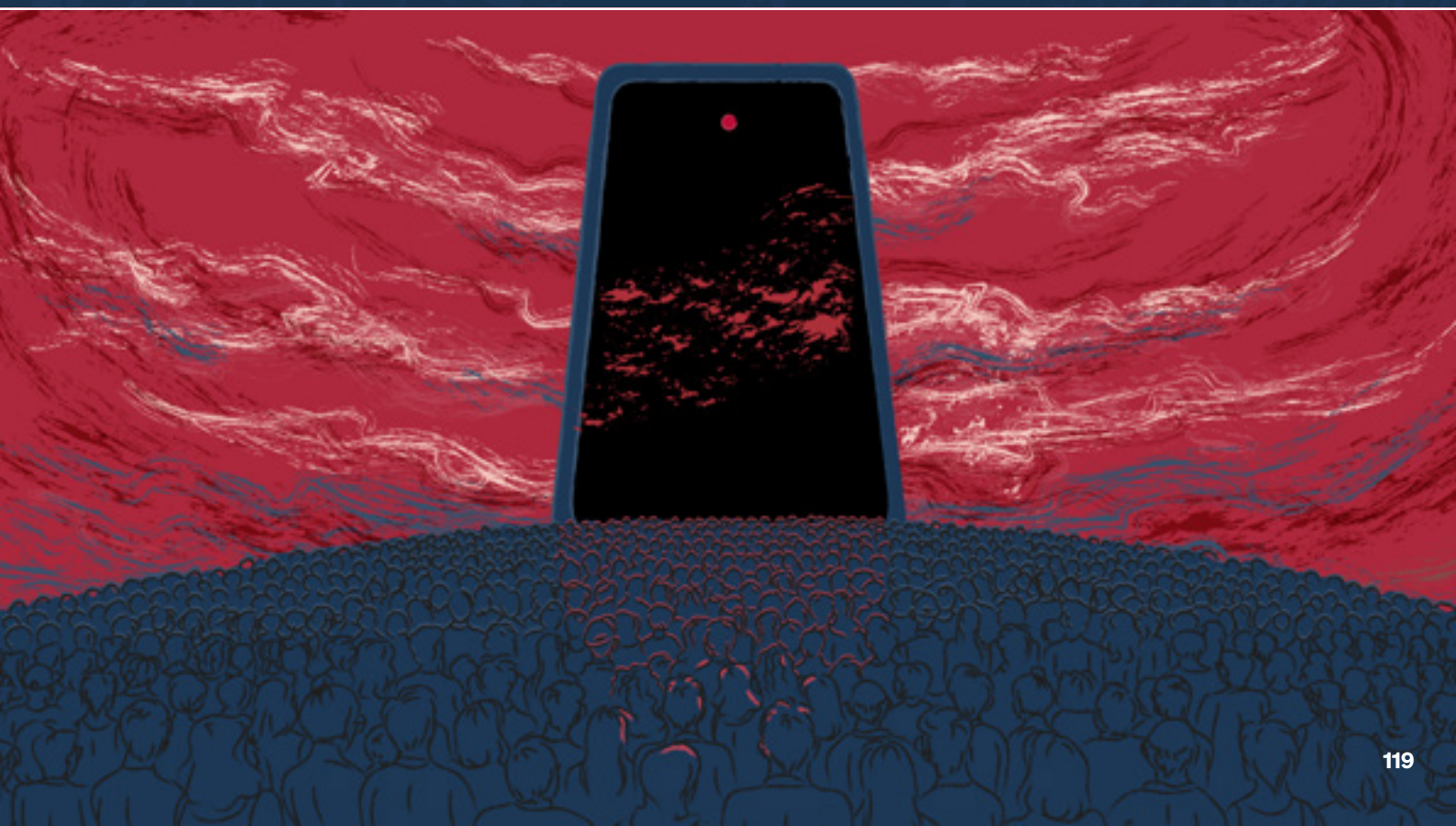
If we look deeply, we will see that we are all 'inter-are' with far-right supporters, and we cannot run away. We will see that we are because they are. We will see that our own ways of doing things are part of the system that we want to dismantle. But if we build the personal and collective strength to connect with each other, we will also find the space to practise care; we can perhaps expand our notion of the self to include our immediate communities, and also our opponents. And maybe then we can perceive the others as our homeland[383] – as the former Argentinian president Cristina Kirchner said in 2023.

BIO

Laura Roth is a feminist researcher and activist based in Argentina. She holds a PhD. from Universitat Pompeu Fabra and has been a postdoctoral researcher at Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. As an activist at Barcelona en Comú, she co-founded the international Fearless Cities network, the Feminisation of Politics network, and the Minim municipalist observatory.

AGAINST THE STAGE: Towards a Politics Beyond Performance

Ylkye



Fascism has exploded through a culture of spectacle and performance, most of all in the digital sphere. If the left competes on the same stage, it is doomed to failure. Real politics needs to be based on relationships of care, mutuality and everyday resistance.

Fascism today doesn't stomp in jackboots or torch libraries; it scrolls, tweets, and livestreams. It speaks fluent meme. It knows how to weaponise irony, how to turn outrage into oxygen. Its strength is not found in persuasion. In fact, the far-right has mastered what much of the left still fumbles with: in a world ruled by images, attention *is* power, and attention, once captured, becomes control.

The French theorist Guy Debord saw this coming decades ago. In *The Society of the Spectacle,* written back in 1967, he warned that 'everything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation.' Life, he said, was becoming a movie about itself. Capitalism no longer just sold us things but sold us the feeling of *being* someone. What Debord glimpsed in the static of television has now metastasised into the infinite scroll, where our sense of reality flickers between dopamine hits and sponsored posts. Algorithms have replaced priests and kings as the new arbiters of truth, deciding not only what we see, but what we can imagine seeing at all. We no longer live in the world so much as *look at it*, performing our existence in high definition.[384]

Debord's prophecy was that the spectacle would become total. He was right. The spectacle is not simply propaganda or social media addiction. Consequently, the image has become capitalism's favourite commodity and therein lies the genius, and the danger, of our current moment. Power no longer rules as it once did. It does not ask for obedience. Rather, it floods our perception until resistance feels pointless. The spectacle has colonised not only space, but imagination, and in this new ecology, fascism has found a perfect home.

The Spectacle and its Mutations

Guy Debord called the *spectacle*, a social order where 'the tangible world is replaced by a selection of images which exist above it, and which simultaneously impose themselves as the tangible par excellence.'[385] Essentially, a condition of life under late capitalism, where reality itself is experienced primarily as representation.

In this sense, one might observe that from Mussolini's staged marches to Hitler's filmic rallies, fascism has always been an aesthetic project. Today, it wears new masks. Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi: each translates fascism into the native dialect of the digital age: virality, outrage, and performance. The French theorist Jean Baudrillard once remarked that in the age of simulation, 'the Gulf War did not take place.'[386] Obviously, he did not mean it literally. He meant that it was experienced primarily as an image, sanitised for mass consumption. Trump's presidencies followed that same logic; a constant loop of televised outrage, simulating politics while displacing its substance. What mattered was not governance but the *optics* of dominance, the theatre of grievance, the memeable moment.

Donald Trump understood that democracy had mutated into a streaming service. Politics had become entertainment where every tweet he made was a flare into the media's bloodstream; every insult, a headline; every scandal, a marketing campaign. If we look closely, we may realise his chaos was not a flaw. His genius, if one dares call it that, was semiotic. He recognised that to be 'effective' in this new age, persuasion was unimportant. After all, in this algorithmic economy, engagement *is* consent.

And mainstream journalism, obsessed with clicks and neutrality, became his unwitting amplifier. Coverage that sought to expose him only deepened his myth. The press couldn't look away, and in not looking away, it became part of the *performance*. As Michael Gerson wrote in *The Washington Post*, his 'authenticity' wasn't honesty but moral laziness, the performance of rawness mistaken for truth. His shamelessness was his armour, and the more vulgar he was, the more 'real' he appeared.[387] The more the establishment winced, the stronger his followers' devotion grew. Outrage, visibility, legitimacy all fused into one.

Trump's spectacle was carnival: grotesque, captivating, endlessly replayable. It was democracy binge-watched to death. And like any successful franchise, it invited sequels.

If Trump was the carnival barker of post-truth America, Jair Bolsonaro was its evangelical preacher. His 2018 campaign in Brazil was not fought in the open arena of television debates but in the shadowy intimacy of WhatsApp chats. While mainstream media wrung its hands over policy, Bolsonaro's digital troops unleashed an untraceable deluge of misinformation: doctored photos of left-wing politicians defiling Christian symbols, conspiracy theories about 'gender ideology', apocalyptic sermons warning that Satan had infiltrated the state.

The strategy was devastatingly simple. Convert alienation into moral panic, fear into faith. As The Guardian reported, these private messaging networks reached millions daily, forming a subterranean propaganda machine beyond the reach of regulation.[388] Each message arrived from a friend or a pastor, not from 'the media', which distrusted abstraction and thus felt more intimate, more real. Bolsonaro's *genius* was to sacralise the spectacle. His rallies mixed nationalist nostalgia with Pentecostal ecstasy. Consequently, his followers did not simply vote for him. They *believed* in him. In this novel landscape, power spread laterally, not vertically. From phone to phone, pew to pew; a digital Pentecost, so to speak.

Now, if Trump's performance was carnival and Bolsonaro's was crusade, Narendra Modi's is a perfectly choreographed commercial. His regime fuses Hindu myth with Silicon Valley polish: 'Digital India', 'Make in India', 'New India'. Drone-shot rallies, devotional anthems, choreographed humility. You know, the humble tea-seller reborn as global technocrat. His image glows with the clean confidence of a brand campaign; capitalism rebranded as destiny, as fate.

The spectacle surrounding Modi is sustained by a tireless digital army. Through Twitter, Facebook, and especially WhatsApp, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) has constructed one of the most sophisticated propaganda machines on earth. As a 2021 TIME investigation revealed, Facebook repeatedly ignored internal warnings about Islamophobic content and 'love jihad' conspiracies circulating through Indian networks. These weren't fringe messages.[389] They were systemic, algorithmically boosted narratives binding religion to nationalism, rumour to truth. Political memes became weapons, and digital propaganda sustained the illusion of unity by feeding a steady diet of fear: fear of Muslims, fear of dissenters, fear of imagined traitors. Modi's India hums with the smooth confidence of a start-up while enacting the slow violence of erasure.

And this spectacle of Hindu pride did not stop there. Under Modi, nationalist infrastructure has bulldozed forests, accelerated mining concessions, weakened environmental protections, and opened Indigenous territories to extractive industries dressed as development[390]. Hindutva is not only a spiritual fantasy;[391] it is an ecological project, one that ties ethno-nationalism to industrial expansion and treats the land as expendable in the service of a mythic India.

Across Trump's America, Bolsonaro's Brazil, and Modi's India runs a single thread: the spectacle as emotional architecture. Fascism doesn't conquer through arguments; it seduces through feelings. It gives shape to emptiness and transforms pain into content. And in doing so, it keeps it profitable.

This is fascism's emotional genius. It does not abolish misery, but it eroticises power and sells submission as self-expression. It markets cruelty as candour, paranoia as patriotism. It turns the loneliness of the digital subject into a communal high.

It's no coincidence that these movements emerge from societies saturated with screens and stripped of meaning. When every emotion is filtered, when community collapses into comment sections, people hunger for intensity, in whatever form that may be. Fascism supplies it. It offers identity as spectacle, the same structure capitalism uses to sell us sneakers or lifestyles, only now branded as nationalism.

In this sense, fascism is not capitalism's antithesis but its logical mutation, its ecstatic culmination. It fuses consumer desire with political devotion, producing citizens who consume their own servitude as content. It takes the capitalist script, 'you are what you buy', and rewrites it as 'you are what you hate'. And the spectacle provides the soundtrack. Fascism thrives in this algorithmic sea because the spectacle rewards its methods. Hate is efficient. Nuance isn't. The platform economy does not care about truth, and to be frank, outrage, unlike reason, never runs out of fuel.

The new fascist doesn't need a Ministry of Truth when there's already a marketplace of distraction. 'Flood the zone with shit-', said the MAGA propagandist Steve Bannon, and he meant it.

In the fog of spectacle, fatigue itself becomes a form of consent. The left keeps trying to fact-check its way out of emotional warfare, but fascism is not a theory to be disproven. Its power lies in the way it *feels* right, even when it's wrong, and in how it offers coherence to a disoriented self. This is why every scandal makes the strongman stronger. Scandal confirms his myth of persecution. Meanwhile, the economic order that breeds this anxiety remains intact. This is the quiet terror of our century.

What we are witnessing globally, then, is not simply a political shift but a spiritual one. The neoliberal subject, starved of belonging and haunted by precarity, finds in fascism the spectacle of certainty. The flags, chants, and digital crusades provide a temporary reprieve from the unbearable ambiguity of freedom, a politics that doesn't so much promise change as it anaesthetises the masses. And until we confront the psychic and material conditions that make such longing so pervasive, we will remain vulnerable to fascism's next reincarnation, however it chooses to brand itself in the spectacle to come.

When Resistance Becomes Content

If fascism thrives through spectacle, the left too often withers in it. Resistance has become another aesthetic: earnest, righteous, and algorithmically legible. Every protest is pre-packaged for the feed, and every slogan is designed to trend. The street has become a stage. The revolution is now a livestream, and if it's not filmed, it might as well not have happened.

Visibility, in this regard, promises empowerment but often delivers capture. The more the left insists on being *seen*, the more it becomes raw material for the very systems it opposes. What is apparent is that the spectacle does not fear dissent. Consider how quickly the radical energy of Black Lives Matter was aestheticised. In the wake of George Floyd's murder, millions took to the streets demanding justice. A cry for abolition, for transformation, for breath. Yet within weeks, the language of abolition

had been hollowed out by marketing departments and PR firms. Corporate 'solidarity' statements flooded social media, offering hashtags instead of reparations. Police departments painted 'Black Lives Matter' on streets they continued to patrol with impunity.[392] Rage became a mural, and pain, once again, became content. The system didn't fight the spectacle; it joined it. The demand for transformation was replaced by the gesture of awareness, making the radical, decorative.

The same logic haunts the climate movement. Extinction Rebellion, with its striking costumes and choreographed die-ins, understood that to capture media attention, one must stage the apocalypse. Its protests looked revolutionary: color-coded masses, artful banners, theatrical arrests. But as The Guardian reported, those images dominated headlines without producing corresponding positive policy shifts. The performance of rebellion became the rebellion itself.[393]

Even though the left's spectacular moments often emerge from real structural pain and righteous fury, once they are translated into the circuitry of the spectacle, their power is drained.

You see, the spectacle rewards those who perform well within it, and corporations are no strangers to such nuanced choreography. During moments of upheaval, they temporarily borrow the language of the streets, *equity*, *inclusion*, *solidarity*, while continuing to exploit labour, pollute ecosystems, and bankroll authoritarian politics. As The Guardian observed, tech giants like Apple, Amazon, and Facebook eagerly aligned themselves with Black Lives Matter even as their internal practices perpetuated surveillance, union-busting, and systemic inequality.[394] Capitalism's quiet brilliance lies in its unending ability to metabolise opposition. Anti-capitalist aesthetics circulate through the same infrastructures that profit from them. Activist art drives ad revenue; radical essays boost engagement metrics. Frustratingly, what was once subversive becomes merch.

Even queerness, born from defiance, has been rendered safe and consumable. Pride month arrives like a global sale: rainbows slapped on the logos of weapons manufacturers, banks, and soda companies. Queer liberation is now a brand category, marketed with slogans about authenticity by corporations that fund politicians who are hostile to trans rights. Similarly, feminism has been reimagined as empowerment chic. Yet another commodity to be sold under fluorescent lights.

And then there's Palestine. Every few months, its suffering goes briefly viral, an algorithmic flare of conscience, before fading back into the endless scroll. Online solidarity seemingly burns bright, then disappears under the next trending catastrophe. This is the digital ouroboros of modern resistance.[395]

Spectacle works for the right because it is an extension of their ideology. The mythos, grievance, and emotional blunt force are all rewarded in this myopic sphere, which, in essence, reduces complexity into fear. The left, seeking visibility, ends up producing content because the spectacle is a betrayal of what it stands for. The very tools we use to organise inadvertently neutralise us because these platforms are not neutral arenas. Therefore, every act of digital resistance enriches the empire of surveillance. We, the unpaid labour of our own subversion.

This is why even the most radical moment risks becoming a moodboard. The global protests of 2020 were monumental in their courage, but their imagery, the raised fists, the burning cop cars, the lines of riot shields, also fed the machine. Each *image* circulated endlessly, framed by headlines and hashtags, until the rebellion itself felt *cinematic*. The uprising was archived as spectacle, and its urgency flattened into aesthetic memory. Yes, the revolution was televised, but it was also commodified and finally tranquilised.

In this theatre of rebellion, the algorithm decides which struggles trend and which vanish. It dictates the tone: moral outrage yes, structural analysis, no, and the result is a politics of reaction; fast, furious, forgettable.

However, the spectacle is not the enemy of activism. Rather, it is its parasite. It feeds on the moral energy of the left while draining its capacity for strategy. To resist it requires more than purity; it requires refusal. Withdrawal, in this case, is not defeat but discipline: the courage to act where cameras can't follow and to build power not dependent on applause. The task ahead is to learn invisibility as a political skill. To know when not to post, when not to explain, and when to work in silence. Real movements do not need the algorithm's validation. The abolitionists of the nineteenth century didn't have Instagram stories, yet their message endured over centuries. Today, we risk confusing reach with depth, relevance with effect, and that seems to be the more compromising mistake.

Real resistance will not be televised because it will not need to be. It will exist in the spaces beyond performance. The task ahead is to rediscover the politics of doing rather than displaying.

The work of liberation, after all, was never meant to be pretty.

Beyond the Stage

To move beyond performance, we must unlearn the spectacle's first commandment: *to matter, you must be seen.* Liberation begins in the places the algorithm can't find. Politics, if it is to mean anything again, must be rebuilt as infrastructure. We must rebuild the quiet circuits of care that sustain life when the systems meant to do so have collapsed under their own narcissism. The pandemic exposed this mercilessly. Governments fumbled, markets froze, and yet life continued. Not because of the state, but because of the neighbour. As the machinery of the world stalled, people improvised: food deliveries, rent relief, mental-health check-ins, mutual care.

Mutual aid, in its simplest sense, is the voluntary and reciprocal exchange of resources and care for mutual benefit. Yet its significance runs deeper than mere generosity. It is a collective refusal to wait for institutions that have already withdrawn their support. When the state abandons them, people turn back to one another, rebuilding the social bonds capitalism has spent centuries eroding. As Simon Springer observed during the COVID-19 crisis, these networks are not spontaneous charity but enduring infrastructures of care, political in their tenderness, revolutionary in their refusal of isolation.[396] Mutual aid is not a safety net; it's a blueprint for another world.

In Cape Town, for instance, neighbourhood-level Community Action Networks (CANs) emerged to meet urgent needs: distributing food, sharing health information, caring for those in quarantine, supporting people whose livelihoods had abruptly vanished. These networks operated largely outside formal state channels, relying on improvisation, trust, and local knowledge to ensure help reached where it was most needed.[397] Mutual aid resists the spectacle precisely because it operates on a scale the algorithm cannot monetise.

Similarly, if mutual aid restores human relation, Indigenous land defence restores relation with the Earth. From Wet'suwet'en to the Maasai, from the Amazon to Standing Rock, Indigenous movements resist both extraction and exposure. They refuse the colonial gaze that turns their struggle into tragic content for distant viewers. They resist erasure not by performing their pain but by cultivating endurance.

Their time is not our time. Their movements operate with the rhythm of the seasons, the cycles of harvest and ceremony, rather than the tempo of social-media outrage. As Penados et al. note in their study of Indigenous resistance in the Caribbean, these communities confront what the scholar Rob Nixon calls 'slow violence'. The drawn-out, cumulative harm of colonialism and capitalist extraction. Their answer is a politics of persistence and a refusal to conform to neoliberal urgency. They assert *temporal sovereignty*: the right to live, resist, and renew within their own temporal frameworks.[398]

This endurance is not passivity but insurgent patience. It's a refusal of the spectacle's tyranny of immediacy. The infatuating demand that every struggle be instantly legible, visually gripping, and shareable. To endure is to reject that demand and reclaim time as a site of decolonial power. Indigenous resistance reminds us that invisibility can be a form of protection. Because the most enduring acts of freedom are often those least visible: the village replanting its crops after a cyclone; the grandmother teaching her language in secret; the youth collective fixing a community water pump without permission or press coverage. The revolution we need may not be glamorous, but it may be necessary maintenance.

And then there is the everyday; the quiet, unremarkable revolution of living differently. When you cook instead of consume, repair instead of replace, listen instead of scroll, you're already breaking the spell. Everyday resistance dismantles alienation from the inside out. It builds coherence where capitalism breeds fragmentation by refusing to let life be outsourced to the feed. These gestures seem small, even apolitical, but they strike at the very heart of the spectacle's logic.

Moreover, these actions are reminders that the digital is not immaterial. Therefore, our collective decision to 'do differently' means we recognise that the spectacle rests on a foundation of extraction. Take, cobalt mined under violent conditions, rare earth minerals torn from Indigenous lands, server farms devouring rivers of electricity, and e-waste dumped into the Global South in toxic heaps. The immateriality is *the* illusion, and it is one of which we must disabuse ourselves.

Guy Debord, writing amid the neon chaos of the 1960s, called for the creation of such *situations*. Those moments of direct, lived encounter that rupture the passivity of the spectacle. For the Situationists, art and politics were not separate domains but interwoven practices for awakening life to itself. A "situation" was not an event to be filmed but an experience to be shared: a temporary space where people could imagine and act together, free from mediation. In the decades since, capitalism has worked tirelessly to neutralise this insight, turning 'experience' into a product and 'authenticity' into a brand. We now pay for curated 'moments', rent 'authenticity' as décor, and call it self-expression. But Debord's idea still endures. It insists that meaning cannot be outsourced to images but must be made in relation.[399]

Therefore, to live otherwise today is to heed that call. It is to create spaces of shared life that cannot be commodified. Worker cooperatives, communal gardens, neighbourhood art projects, care networks, as has been described above. These are not retreats from politics but its reinvention. They are messy, local, and embodied, which is precisely why they work.

In the end, this is where the next politics will be born. Away from performance.

The Politics of the Unseen

The world will not be saved by better optics. Liberation will not come from the algorithm's mercy, nor from another trending hashtag drenched in moral urgency. The revolution we need will be unphotogenic, and it will require us to remember how to look one another in the eye. Withdrawal here means withdrawing from the platforms engineered to addict us, from the feeds that algorithmically prioritise outrage, from the interfaces that flatten our politics into content, and from the metrics that turn solidarity into performance. It is the slow, stubborn act of reclaiming our attention from the devices that have colonised it. It is choosing to inhabit time differently, to think outside the cadence of notifications, to organise beyond the reach of platforms that render every political act consumable.

Power wants us to believe that only what's visible matters. But the next world will be made in the shadows, by those who know that the unseen is where life regenerates. Every empire of illusion eventually chokes on its own noise. We know this to be true. The spectacle cannot feed itself forever because it needs our attention to live. Withdrawing that attention to redirect it towards one another is the most dangerous gesture imaginable. And yet it's how the invisible begins to move.

Let fascism have its floodlights, its rallies, its endless scroll of grievance. Let the spectacle exhaust itself in its theatre of self-importance. Meanwhile, we will be elsewhere building the quiet architectures of survival, joy, and care. The real avant-garde now is maintenance. The true rebellion is continuity. Because when the lights finally burn out, it won't be the most visible who remain, but the most connected. Those who chose *relation* over representation, *presence* over performance. And from their patient hands, the world will begin again.

BIO

Ylkye is a Kenyan student of psychology, a writer, and seeker with a deep commitment to thinking critically, feeling deeply, and imagining otherwise. Drawn to the intersections of political theory, media analysis, and the hidden architectures of power, their work explores how systems shape not only the world around us but also the interior landscapes of self and spirit.

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The author Roberto J. González is a professor of anthropology at San José State University, his academic home since 2001. His areas of expertise are science, technology, and culture; militarisation in US society; anthropological ethics; and environmental anthropology. You can reach him at roberto.gonzalez@sjsu.edu.

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